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Aligning Personnel Support to Foster Personal Initiative

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<p>A proactive workforce is increasingly important for companies facing global competition in innovation-heavy, customer centric industries. Novel organizational models relying on employee autonomy further emphasize the need for initiative-taking individuals. While proactivity has been researched extensively, the means through which organizations can seek to tap into the potential for proactivity in their workforces have remained predominantly unidentified.</p> <p>The focus of this thesis is on how companies could utilize <i>high-performance work practices</i> (HPWPs) to foster <i>personal initiative</i> (PI) in the workforce. HPWPs are an area of interest within human resource management literature, whereas PI is a specific conceptualization of proactive behavior. This thesis combines these two distinct research streams in an effort to shed light on the relationships between them.</p> <p>This research followed a qualitative design and a single case study methodology. Literature on HPWPs and PI were synthesized to form a tentative model of the connections between the two. The data collection method of this study was theme interviews with employees of a Finnish, medium sized software company in a globally competitive environment (n=20).</p> <p>Statements by informants were mapped onto specific HPWPs and antecedents of PI. Direct quotes were also provided to add to the depth of analysis. The analyzed data were utilized to scrutinize the constructed theoretical model.</p> <p>The main finding of this study is that HPWPs such as decentralized decision making and flexible work assignments likely have an impact on the psychological antecedents of PI (PIAs). Additionally, the results suggest that intra-organizational communication might moderate the relationships between other HPWPs and PIAs, in addition having a direct relationship.</p> <p>Avenues for further research on the topic were proposed, as considering high-performance work practices and personal initiative jointly is still a rather novel approach. May this thesis serve as inspiration for future efforts to develop knowledge on ways to enhance proactivity through personnel support practices.</p>		
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<p>Työntekijöiden proaktiivisuus on yhä tärkeämpää yrityksille jotka kohtaavat maailmanlaajuista kilpailua innovaatio- ja asiakaskeskeisillä toimialoilla. Itseohjautuvuuteen perustuvat uudenlaiset organisaatiomallit korostavat aloitekykyisten yksilöiden tärkeyttä. Siinä missä proaktiivisuutta on tutkittu laajalti, keinot joita organisaatiot voisivat hyödyntää lisätäkseen työntekijöidensä aloitteellisuutta ovat enimmäkseen tunnistamattomia.</p> <p>Tässä diplomityössä tutkittiin miten yritykset voisivat hyödyntää <i>tuloshakuisia henkilöstökäytäntöjä</i> edistääkseen <i>aloitteellisuutta</i>. Tuloshakuiset henkilöstökäytännöt ovat henkilöstöjohtamisen osa-alue, kun taas aloitteellisuus on yksi proaktiivisuuden käsitteistä. Tämä työ yhdistää kaksi edellämäinnittua tutkimuskohdetta, tavoitteenaan luoda uutta tietoa niiden välisistä yhteyksistä.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessa käytettiin laadullisia tutkimusmenetelmiä ja tapaustutkimusmetodia. Aloitteellisuuden ja tuloshakuisten henkilöstökäytäntöjen kytköksistä muodostettiin alustava teoreettinen malli taustakirjallisuuteen pohjautuen. Tutkimuksen tiedonkeruumenetelmä oli teemahaastattelut suomalaisen, maailmanlaajuisesti kilpailevan keskisuuren ohjelmistoyrityksen työntekijöiden kanssa (n=20).</p> <p>Haastateltavien kommentit ryhmiteltiin aloitteellisuuden ja tuloshakuisten henkilöstökäytäntöjen käsitteiden mukaan. Analyysin syventämiseksi tarkasteltiin myös suoria lainauksia. Analysoitua dataa käytettiin muodostetun teoreettisen mallin kriittiseen tarkasteluun.</p> <p>Tämän työn keskeisin tulos on, että tuloshakuisia henkilöstökäytännöillä, kuten hajautetulla päätöksenteolla ja työtehtävien joustavuudella lienee vaikutusta aloitteellisuuden psykologisiin esiteikijöihin. Lisäksi yrityksen sisäiset kommunikaatio-käytännöt saattavat moderoida muiden tuloshakuisten henkilöstökäytäntöjen ja aloitteellisuuden esiteikijöiden välisiä suhteita suoran yhteytensä lisäksi.</p> <p>Lopuksi työssä ehdotetaan aiheita jatkotutkimukselle, sillä aloitteellisuuden ja tuloshakuisten henkilöstökäytäntöjen yhteistarkastelu on vielä kovin uutta. Olkoon tämä työ inspiraation lähde tulevaisuuden pyrkimyksille lisätä ymmärrystä aloitteellisuuden luomiselle henkilöstön tuen keinoin.</p>			
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Esipuhe

”Opiskelu – mikä ihana tekosyy!” kuuluu lausahdus, joka fuksivuonna tiivistä kaiken sen mitä teekkarius minulle tarkoittaa. Näin kuutisen vuotta myöhemminkään en tosin osaa oikeastaan selittää miksi juuri nuo sanat minua niin puhuttelevat. Oli miten oli – akateemiset opinnot ovat tältä erää paketissa, ja huomaan katsovani yhtäaikaisesti niin eteen- kuin taaksepäin.

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“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”
-Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

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Terminology and abbreviations

HR	Human resources
HRM	Human resource management
SHRM	Strategic human resource management
HPWP /HPWS	High-performance work practice / system
PI	Personal initiative
PIA	Personal initiative antecedent / antecedent of personal initiative
PPS	Proactive personality scale
KSA	Knowledge, skills and abilities
DDM	Decentralized decision making
SDT	Self-determination theory

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and motivation

The contemporary business environment is a dynamic and complex setting, characterized by global competition, fast-paced innovation and unpredictable changes in stakeholder expectations (Hong, Liao, Raub, & Han, 2016). The role of initiative and proactive behavior of employees is increasingly crucial both for the success of individuals and organizations alike. New forms of management often characterized by reduced amounts of direct supervision and consequently increased employee autonomy demand initiative-taking employees in order to be successful (Sonnentag, 2003). Global competition and the fast pace of innovation require employees to take initiative to continuously develop their skillset in order for them to stay competitive (Frese & Fay, 2001), as well as to be able to cope with the demands imposed by novel managerial models.

Personal initiative is a construct of proactive behavior characterized by its self-starting nature, proactive approach, and by being persistent in the face of obstacles that arise in the pursuit of goals (Frese & Fay, 2001; Frese, Fay, Hilburger, Leng, & Tag, 1997; Frese, Kring, Soose, & Zempel, 1996). Consistent with the above postulations, personal initiative has been shown to be positively linked to companies' financial performance (Fay & Frese, 2001). In addition, personal initiative has also been found to increase employee engagement (Hakanen, Perhoniemi, & Toppinen-Tanner, 2008). As *disengagement* has been shown to be a predictor of burnout (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004), it can thus be stated that personal initiative, through increasing employee engagement can decrease the risk for burnout. Personal initiative is thus important for organizations both with the context of enabling and succeeding in operations in the business environment, as well as with a wider perspective considering workforce wellbeing.

While the antecedents of personal initiative are quite well-understood from an individual's perspective, the means through which organizations can influence the initiative behavior of their workforces remains rather under-researched. It is currently not truly understood how different kinds of organizational models, management practices and personnel support activities foster or stand as barriers to initiative behavior. Thus, the purpose of this thesis is to uncover what kinds of organizational activities are linked to the psychological antecedents of personal initiative. Particularly,

the focus of the present study is to explore how certain *human resource* practices might be connected to personal initiative. More specifically, the relationship between *high-performance work practices* and personal initiative is assessed through synthesizing existing research, after which data from a single-case study is analyzed and presented to provide further insight on the potential relationships between human resource practices and initiative. This study thus ties research on organizational support activities with proactivity research, offering avenues for future research with the intent of enabling organizations to perform better in the future by fostering personal initiative. The case company of this study was selected from an operating environment in which personal initiative of the workforce is increasingly important – a business area which is knowledge intensive, innovation-dependent, customer centric and globally competitive.

1.2 Research problem and objectives

The research problem of this study is:

What kinds of personnel support practices can companies utilize to foster personal initiative?

The main objective of this study is to contribute to work psychology and organizational research by joining personal initiative and high-performance work practice literature to

- a) increase understanding about their relationship with each other
- b) provide empirical data to support or refute the expected relationships
- c) serve as a spearheading effort in a mostly pristine research stream combining two well-researched topics

In addition to the main objective, this study also has two secondary objectives. The reason for formulating these objectives was to provide incentive for the case company to participate – they inject an amount of practical relevance into this thesis so that the case company could gain concrete benefits.

The main objective (O1) as well as the secondary objectives (O2 and O3) of this study are formally stated as:

- O1:** *Uncovering how high-performance work practices can be utilized to foster personal initiative*
- O2:** *Understanding the case company's specific situation with regards to the activities discovered.*
- O3:** *Revealing what the most crucial aspects for fostering personal initiative in the case company are – what should be retained and what are the most critical improvement areas.*

1.3 Scope of the thesis

In this thesis, employee support is operationalized with *high-performance work practices*, which are presented in Chapter 2. Overall, high-performance work practices capture the essential elements of employee support which seem to tie into personal initiative. However, specific parts or facets of individual high-performance work practices are not considered in this thesis. As this thesis focuses on employee support, practices not strictly related to supporting the existing workforce are excluded from its scope. An example of such a practice would be recruiting, as its primary goal is not to directly support existing employees. It could be argued that new recruits may support existing employees by providing their expertise or by sharing the workload. However, the extent of a new employee's supportive effect can be very limited – to within a small team, for instance. As such, recruiting is not considered a personnel support practice and is thus outside the scope of this thesis.

As will be presented in Chapter 2, there are several antecedents to personal initiative behavior, including personality and environmental factors. The traditional view on personality research is that personality is rather stable and unchangeable after the age of 30 (Costa & McCrae, 1988), but research has also found that an individual's personality may change significantly even in adulthood (Boyce, Wood, & Powdthavee, 2013). Further, Boyce et al. (2013) suggest that the operating environment of a person may well be an important factor in the development of their personality. Thus, it could be argued that an organization could influence initiative behavior of the workforce through seeking to affect the development of its employees' personalities via fostering a specific environment. However, as will be explained in more detail in Chapter 2, certain environmental factors also have an effect on personal initiative on their own. As such,

this study focuses primarily on the more direct effects of environmental factors on personal initiative. Whether the same environmental factors could also affect personal initiative via changing personalities is outside the scope of this study.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The first chapter presents the background and motivation for this thesis. It also includes the research problem and objectives, in addition to defining the scope of the thesis. The relevant literature associated with the research topic is reviewed in Chapter 2. Specifically, research on personal initiative, strategic human resource management and high-performance work practices are presented. In addition, Chapter 2 includes a synthesis of the aforementioned research streams, which serves as the main tool of analysis in this thesis. Chapter 3 presents the methodology of this study, including the research questions as well as descriptions of data collection and analysis. The results obtained are presented in Chapter 4, divided into two main sections: results concerning *high-performance work practices* and results concerning *antecedents of personal initiative*. Chapter 5 contains discussion of the results, from both theoretical and practical perspectives, aiming to answer the research questions. Finally, conclusions of this study as well as avenues for future research are presented in Chapter 6.

2 Literature review

As work becomes more dynamic and decentralized, proactive behavior as well as initiative are becoming more and more critical for the success of organizations (Crant, 2000). 21st century organizations need a workforce capable of independent initiative, autonomous judgement and decision making capacity, as well as an analytical and innovative approach to tasks and problems (López-Cabarcos, Machado-Lopes-Sampaio-de Pinho, & Vázquez-Rodríguez, 2015). Crant (2000) defines proactive behavior as “taking initiative in improving current circumstances or creating new ones; it involves challenging the status quo rather than passively adapting to present conditions.” As such, “proactive behaviors” can be considered an umbrella term encompassing a multitude of more narrowly defined constructs. Indeed, proactive behavior has been conceptualized and measured in a variety of ways (Crant, 2000). Parker et al. (2010) identify *personal initiative* as one of the most important active work concepts within proactivity literature. Consequently, personal initiative serves as the theoretical locus of this thesis. Other conceptualizations of proactive behaviors include for example *voice* and *taking charge* (Thomas, Whitman, & Viswesvaran, 2010). Next, the concept of personal initiative and its antecedents are presented in more detail.

2.1 Personal initiative

Personal initiative (PI) is a work behavior characterized by its self-starting nature, long-term focus, consistency with the organizational mission, persistency in the face of barriers and setbacks, as well as goal-directedness and action orientation (Frese et al., 1996). Personal initiative is regarded an *active performance concept* (Frese & Fay, 2001). As opposed to passive, more traditional performance concepts where employees take over tasks and goals given “from the outside”, an active performance concept entails that people at work go beyond such assigned tasks, assigning and taking action towards their own goals (Frese & Fay, 2001). Personal initiative is often regarded contextual or extra-role performance. Contextual performance refers to activities which do not contribute to the organization through its technical core, but rather maintain the broader organizational, social and psychological environment in which the technical core functions (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). Contextual performance is contrary to task performance: transforming raw materials into products and services, or by otherwise

supporting such activity by e.g. distributing finished products or planning organizational activities (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). Speier and Frese (1997) draw a direct parallel between contextual performance and personal initiative, stating that they both a) do not directly relate to the technical core, b) are common and equally useful to all jobs, c) relate to volition, and d) refer to extra-role activities. Furthermore, Frese and Fay (2001) propose that the greater the psychological distance between what an employee is doing and what is “normal” for them, the more of a display of personal initiative is in question. This would suggest that task performance – which can be thought of as “normal” work of an employee – is distinct from personal initiative. However, Parker, Williams, and Turner (2006) suggest that there is no need to confine proactivity – and by extension, personal initiative – to contextual performance. As such, an individual could display personal initiative even in their ordinary work tasks.

Table 1 – Summary of PI characteristics (Frese & Fay, 2001; Frese et al., 1996)

Characteristic	Description
Pro-company	Although personal initiative may be considered rebellious at times (especially by managers), in the long run PI must be in accordance with overall organizational goals.
Proactive and long-term focus	Future demands and problems are anticipated. Preparing for or preventing them are characteristic of personal initiative. This implies attempts to develop feedback signals which signify future challenges and actively developing plans for their occurrence.
Action-orientation and goal-directedness	Redefinition or ‘translation’ of organizational goals to personal objectives, tendency to put intentions into action quickly instead of e.g. avoiding decision-making, procrastinating or distracting oneself with other tasks (state orientation).
Self-starting	Goals are not given or assigned by someone else, but rather the person himself or herself develops these goals. The degree of ‘self-startedness’ can be thought of via the psychological distance of a path compared to the ‘normal’ path.
Persistent	Implementation of long-term goals often leads to new problems, barriers and setbacks. New difficulties will arise along novel ideas. Personal initiative requires persistency in overcoming obstacles.

2.2 Antecedents of personal initiative

A widespread consensus exists amongst researchers that both individual and environmental factors affect individual behavior in organizations (Pervin, 1989). Antecedents of personal initiative – that is, individual or environmental factors which causally precede displays of personal initiative – range from individual differences in personality and individuals' knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) to environmental factors, such as organizational climate, culture and norms as well as work characteristics.

Antecedents of personal initiative have been classified into distal and proximal factors. As their names suggest, proximal antecedents are more predictive of personal initiative, whereas distal causes have less direct impact – they influence behavior mostly through more proximal variables. (Frese & Fay, 2001)

2.2.1 Orientations

Orientations, as described by Frese and Fay (2001), are proximal antecedents to personal initiative. Orientations are what motivate PI, and they serve as mediators to distal factors. As a concept, orientations are of medium specificity – they are not as specific as attitudes, but on the other hand, not as broad as general personality traits. Frese and Fay (2001) identify two sets of orientations. The first set comprises of *control appraisals*, *control and responsibility aspirations* and *self-efficacy*. These orientations motivate personal initiative, as they make showing PI seem possible. They describe whether an individual considers that they are capable of influencing decisions at work and consequently have an impact (control appraisals), whether they are willing to take on control and the responsibilities associated (control and responsibility aspirations) as well as whether they expect to be able to perform actions effectively (self-efficacy).

The other set of orientations consists of *change orientation*, *handling errors* and *active coping*. As Frese and Fay (2001) state, change, stress and errors are to be anticipated as consequences of personal initiative. This set of orientations directly addresses the aforementioned negative consequences and, in contrast to the first set, aids in reducing the barriers for personal initiative.

Although Frese and Fay (2001) note that orientations should be more predictive of personal initiative than more distal causes, for the purposes of this thesis, however, the more distal antecedents are of greater relevance. This is because orientations are

influenced by distal causes, which in turn can potentially be influenced by certain organizational practices, which will be presented further on. For now, it suffices to state that the distal causes could potentially be controlled to an extent in an effort to foster personal initiative. In the following section, distal antecedents of personal initiative are presented in more detail.

2.2.2 Personality traits

Several personality traits have been identified as distal predictors of personal initiative. Frese and Fay (2001) identified four personality factors which distally influence personal initiative. These factors are *achievement motive*, *action orientation*, *psychological conservatism* and *proactive personality*. Achievement motive refers to a high level of aspiration, a strong orientation to succeed in dealing with a task, a focus on personal improvement and an interest in performance feedback (McClelland, 1987). Frese and Fay (2001) note that need for achievement (i.e. achievement motive) is oriented towards working hard and overcoming barriers, but that it does not imply self-startedness. Action orientation, on the other hand, refers to the tendency to put intentions into action quickly, as opposed to procrastinating and avoiding decision making. (Frese & Fay, 2001) Psychological conservatism, on the other hand, signifies a preference towards stability and predictability. Since PI always entails changing the environment to some degree, psychological conservatism is negatively associated with PI. (Fay & Frese, 2001) Finally, a highly proactive personality is a person relatively unconstrained by situational forces; they scan for opportunities, show initiative, take action and persevere until they bring about change (Bateman & Crant, 1993).

Taking on the view that personality is rather stable and unchangeable (Costa & McCrae, 1988) it could be argued that the only feasible way to affect the “overall personality of the workforce” would be through employee selection, i.e. recruiting and layoffs. Although both activities are beyond the scope of this thesis, there is still some purpose to taking personality variables into consideration. As there are other factors than personality which influence PI (Frese & Fay, 2001), it can be inferred that the relative importance of other antecedents is highlighted for persons who are naturally less prone to exhibit PI. Figure 1 seeks to illustrate this idea: in order to display an equal ‘level’ of personal initiative, a less proactive person needs a higher contribution from other antecedent factors. By extension, it can also be argued that people high on PI-boosting personalities would have less need for e.g. organizational support in order to take initiative. This raises

an important consideration: in order to foster PI throughout the whole workforce, the different needs of different personalities need to be taken into account when designing employee support functions.

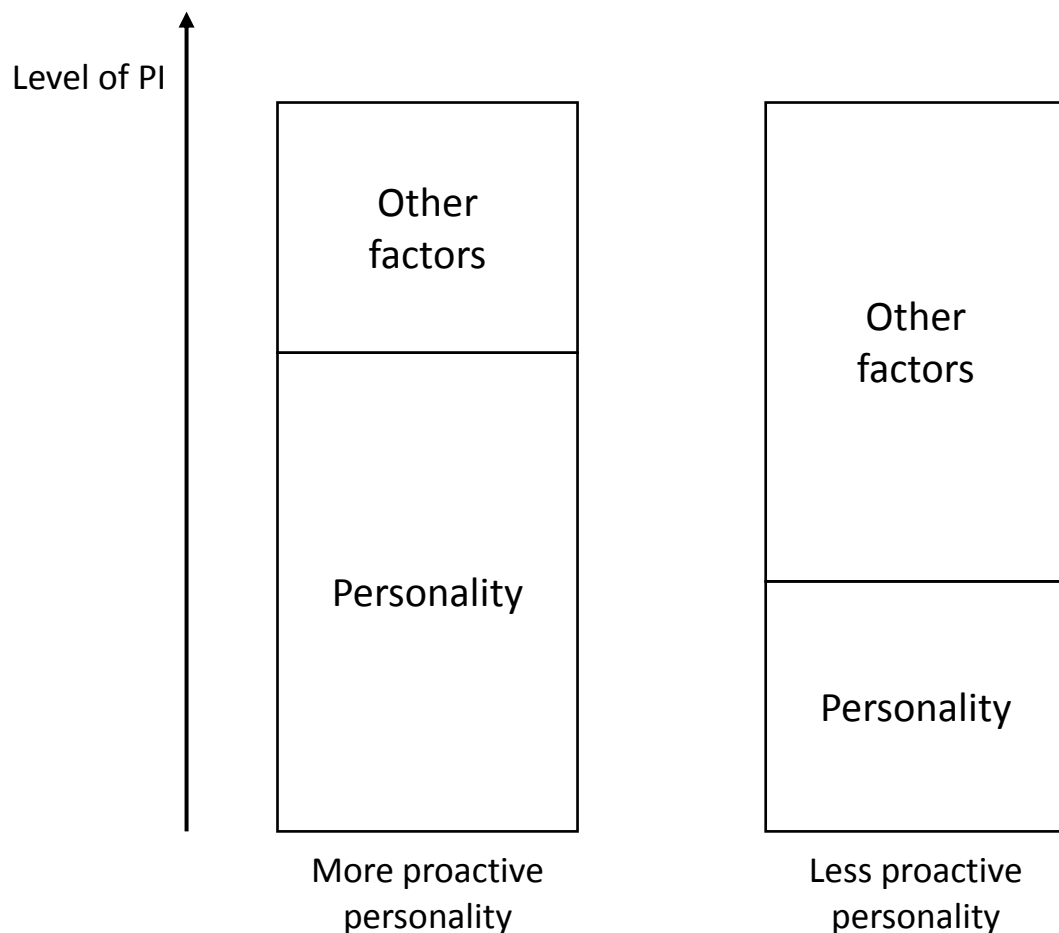


Figure 1 – Relative importance of personality and other factors regarding PI

2.2.3 Knowledge, skills and abilities

Another set of distal factors affecting PI behavior are an individual's *knowledge, skills and abilities*, or KSA (Frese & Fay, 2001). Essential KSA for personal initiative are the qualifications as well as the cognitive ability of an employee. Knowing that one possesses the necessary know-how and capacity to perform specific tasks increases the chance that one feels being in control of outcomes, which should promote personal initiative behavior. The knowledge, skills and abilities of an employee also help develop self-efficacy (Frese & Fay, 2001) – a judgement of one's capability to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated types of performance (Bandura, 1986).

Thus, developing KSA can be seen as a way to further personal initiative. An organization can offer training and development programs for its employees in an effort to increase their KSA – which would ultimately lead to more personal initiative behavior. As postulated earlier, the importance of KSA with regards to PI may vary within the workforce due to individual differences.

2.2.4 Environmental factors

In addition to individual variables (personality, KSA) environmental variables also play a role in fostering PI behavior. In general, environmental supports refer to job and organizational conditions that make it easier to exhibit PI. Environmental supports can be either proximal or distal – some affect PI through orientations, whereas others have a more different influence. (Frese & Fay, 2001) Environmental factors include for instance *work characteristics*, *stressors*, *support for personal initiative* (Frese & Fay, 2001) as well as *climate factors* (Baer & Frese, 2003; Fay, Lührmann, & Kohl, 2004; Raub & Liao, 2012).

Two aspects of work characteristics – namely *control* and *complexity* – have been found to affect personal initiative (Frese & Fay, 2001). Control at work implies having an influence on the sequence, time frame, and content of one's work goals, on one's work strategies, on feedback and on working conditions (Frese, 1989; Frese, Garst, & Fay, 2007), whereas complexity has been defined as the numbers of elements that need to be considered (Wood, 1986). As Frese et al. (2007) note, both control and complexity refer to decision making possibilities.

Organizational justice – employees' perceptions of being treated in a fair manner – has also been shown to promote initiative behavior (López-Cabarcos et al., 2015). Organizational justice comprises of three main components:

- *Distributive justice* – whether compensation or other benefits are proportional to contributions
- *Procedural justice* – whether procedures used to determine outcomes are fair
- *Interactional justice* – fair interpersonal treatment from authority figures, and fostering honest relationships overall

(Greenberg, 2006; López-Cabarcos et al., 2015)

It is worth underlining that the concept of organizational justice incorporates employees' individual *perceptions* (Greenberg, 2006) – employee judgments of fairness may thus outweigh the objective fairness of an organization. The effect of organizational justice on personal initiative is mediated by affective commitment, described as the bond employees develop to the organization they belong in (López-Cabarcos et al., 2015). Affective commitment can be thought of as positive feelings of attachment and enjoyment, or as López-Cabarcos et al. (2015) put it; “employees with AC remain at their organization because they want to, not because they feel obliged to.” López-Cabarcos et al. (2015) go on to posit that affective commitment is actually required in order for organizational justice to have any effect on personal initiative. Affective commitment can thus be considered a proximal antecedent to PI, at least regarding organizational justice. Seeing that affective commitment can be considered a proximal antecedent of PI, it is not within the main focus of this thesis. As such, it shall remain as background information, and will not be assessed in more detail.

Several organizational climate factors have also been found to be related to personal initiative. Organizational climate refers to employees' shared perception on what kinds of work behaviors are encouraged, supported and rewarded within an organization (Schneider, 1990). In addition, climate is best viewed as a climate *for something*, focusing on a specific referent (Schneider, 1975).

Two particularly interesting organizational climates have been identified as antecedents of personal initiative: *climate for psychological safety* (Baer & Frese, 2003) and *error management climate* (van Dyck, Frese, Baer, & Sonnentag, 2005). A climate of psychological safety builds upon the concepts of individual and team psychological safety. From an individualist point-of-view, psychological safety refers to an employee's sense of being able to show and display one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career. As a team-level concept, psychological safety refers to a shared belief that a team is safe for taking interpersonal risks. Finally, a climate for psychological safety describes a work environment where employees are safe to speak up without being rejected or punished. (Baer & Frese, 2003) Mastery of handling errors has been shown to lead to increased personal initiative (Frese & Fay, 2001). Fay et al. (2004) expand this notion to that of error management climate – a collective tendency to discuss errors openly and regard them as learning opportunities – and propose that such a climate should consequently cultivate initiative.

Figure 2 depicts the personal initiative antecedents (PIAs) which are relevant for this study. As the focus of this thesis is on the more distal antecedents of personal initiative,

proximal antecedents, such as orientations, are not present in Figure 2. As will be presented later on, the constructs displayed in Figure 2 serve as a part of the starting point for the analysis of the empirical data gathered for this study.

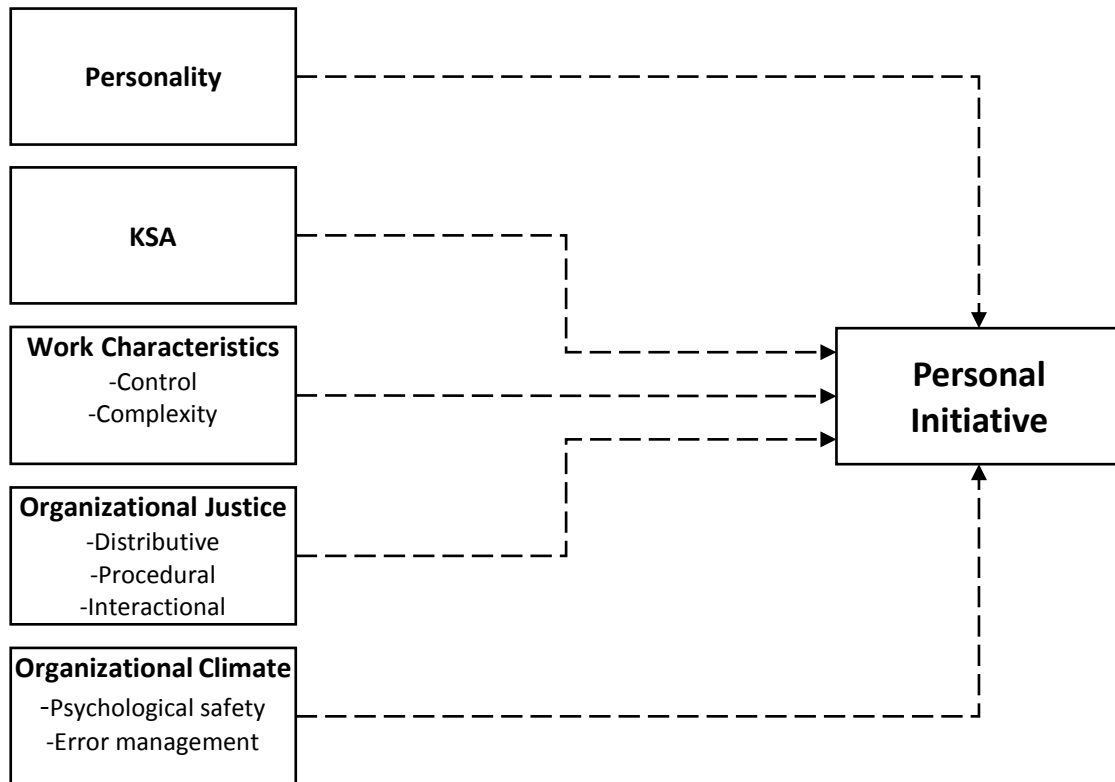


Figure 2 – Relevant antecedents of personal initiative

2.3 Human Resource Management

Human resource management (HRM) is an organizational function striving to improve the performance of its employees, aligned with the employer's strategic objectives (Johnson, 2009). Schuler and MacMilan (1984) have suggested that superior human resource management should yield competitive advantage. Bird and Beechler (1995) support and refine this notion, finding that better business performance can be expected when a company's HRM strategy is aligned with overall business strategy. It can thus be stated that HRM should be viewed as an essential component of an organization's success and it should be designed in conjunction with business strategy. In the following, research on human resource management from a strategic viewpoint is presented.

2.3.1 Strategic HRM and high-performance work practices

Human resource management activities can be loosely divided into two categories, namely *administrative* and *strategic* HRM. Administrative HRM refers to a human resource management practice or doctrine emphasizing administration, compliance and service. Administrative HRM represents an ‘old’ approach to HRM, lacking the strategic focus of its modern counterpart. (Beer, 1997) Becker and Huselid (2006) argue that strategic human resource management (SHRM) differs from traditional (administrative) HRM in two key ways: firstly, the focus of SHRM is organizational instead of individual performance and secondly, SHRM emphasizes the role of HR *systems* in solving business problems, rather than considering individual HR practices in isolation. Strategic HRM thus adopts a wider perspective, focusing on systems and organizations as a whole.

In line with the separating administrative from strategic HRM, Delery and Doty (1996) argue that not all HRM practices actually are strategic. They subsequently identify seven strategic HRM practices which are common to much of the theoretical work regarding SHRM. These practices are 1) Internal career opportunities, 2) Formal training systems, 3) Appraisal measures, 4) Profit sharing, 5) Employment security, 6) Voice mechanisms, and 7) Job definitions.

Although these practices have been found to positively affect organizational performance, the mechanisms through which these practices operate remain unspecified. These practices merely provide aspects to consider when configuring the human resource management of a company. Delery and Doty (1996) argue that choices regarding SHRM practices should reflect an organization’s overall business strategy in order to be effective in boosting financial performance.

Within SHRM literature, organizational practices which enhance employee performance are commonly known as *high-performance work practices* (HPWPs - Huselid, 1995). Dyer and Reeves (1995) suggest that human resource practices yield greater benefits when they are *bundled* – that is, when they occur in “fairly complete, mutually reinforcing or synergistic sets.” Consistent with this as well as previous notions, Evans and Davis (2005) describe *high-performance work systems* (HPWSs) as being integrated systems of HR practices, which are both internally and externally consistent, i.e. aligned among HR practices as well as with organizational strategy.

Evans and Davis (2005) describe seven categories of HR practices which comprise HPWS. These practices are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 – HR practices comprising HPWS (Evans & Davis, 2005).

Practice	Description	Examples
Staffing	Extensiveness of procedures to evaluate relevant knowledge, skills and abilities for job fit and organization fit	Selective screening Assessment of technical and interpersonal skills, attitudes, and/or personality Performance-based promotions
Self-managed teams	Redistribution of power downward by granting authority and responsibility to team structures	Employee participation programs Teams with task and decision-making authority Extensive use of teams throughout the organization
Decentralized decision making	Empowering employees via greater responsibility and access to resources	Less well defined tasks Authority to make decisions Employee involvement Participative management
Training	Extensiveness of formalized programs to develop knowledge, skills and abilities	Training for current and future skills; including technical and interpersonal Cross training Training for both new hires and experienced employees
Flexible work assignments	Opportunities to broaden individual knowledge, skills and abilities	Job rotation; rotation across teams Ability to perform +1 job Job enrichment
Communication	Open vertical and horizontal communication channels providing access to information and opportunities to express viewpoints	Access to all levels of operating results Employee suggestion systems Explanation of business strategy
Compensation	Performance-contingent pay, group-based pay, and above-market pay policies	Profit/gain sharing Employee ownership Comparatively high level of pay Performance-contingent pay Team-based pay

2.3.2 The relationship between HPWPs and SHRM

As previously mentioned, high-performance work practices are an area of interest within SHRM literature. The previously presented seven strategic HRM practices bear a resemblance with high performance work practices – indeed, most of the SHRM practices are either incorporated in a high-performance work practice or vice-versa, and in some instances the constructs are virtually synonymous. This would suggest that the terms are somewhat interchangeable. Table 3 outlines how the specific HPWPs and SHRM practices which were presented earlier are linked to each other. As stated above, some of the concepts are practically equal. On the other hand, *job definitions (SHRM)*, *staffing*, *communication and compensation (HPWPs)*, do not seem to have direct counterparts, but do have at least some commonalities with other concepts. For example, while voice mechanisms and appraisal measures quite clearly relate to intra-organizational communication, this is not a comprehensive, one-to-one mapping. Table 3 should be interpreted more as an exhibition of the overall relatedness of SHRM and HPWPs, rather than a depiction of meticulous conformity.

Table 3 – Interrelatedness between HPWPs and SHRM practices

HPWP	SHRM Practice	Common theme / logic
Staffing	Internal career opportunities	Opportunities for career advancement within the organization
Self-managed teams	Job definitions	Wide reliance on employees / teams to make decisions regarding ways of working, projects, etc.
Decentralized decision making		
Training	Formal training systems	Investing in developing the capabilities of the existing workforce
Flexible work assignments	Job definitions	Providing opportunities for job enrichment according to employee interest
Communication	Voice mechanisms, appraisal measures	Providing two-way communication and opportunities to develop
Compensation	Profit sharing, employment security	Reward and performance management practices and policies

Kehoe and Wright (2013) note that instead of narrowing down a simple set of HPWPs, the HR practices considered varies across studies. They remark that the common denominator within the literature seems to rather be a focus on promoting workforce ability, motivation and opportunity. As such, this thesis adopts the set of high-performance work practices as well as strategic HRM practices described above as tools for analysis.

2.3.3 Synthesis of HPWPs and PIAs

There exists little research on the effects of HR practices on personal initiative. Hong et al. (2016) studied the relationship between ‘initiative enhancing HRM systems’ and personal initiative. They noted how some HR practices could be utilized to foster PI – favoring proactive personalities in employee selection, for example – and showed that a connection indeed exists. On a larger scale, however, the specific relationships between HR practices and personal initiative are still rather understudied, as studies tend to stay on a far more generic level. An example of this would be to merely state that compensation practices can be configured to encourage specific, required behavior (such as in Schuler & Jackson, 1987). More detailed descriptions of how HR decisions influence the psychological antecedents are usually lacking, however.

Linkages between HPWSs and the antecedents of PI can nevertheless be drawn. The following paragraphs are an effort to map the potential routes through which individual HR practices have an influence on PI. The purpose of this is to uncover how organizations might be able to foster initiative behavior through the use of HPWS. The hypothesized relationships are presented from each HPWP to all PI antecedents which could reasonably be expected to be affected by the HPWP in question. These hypothesized linkages are based on the background literature presented previously, but also contain postulations made by the author of this study. In some cases, the relationships between high-performance work practices and antecedents of personal initiative are not immediately obvious, and as such examples clarifying the researcher’s rationale are provided.

Firstly, it is worth noting that Evans and Davis (2005) argue that of the seven practices of HPWSs, all except for ‘flexible work assignments’ play a part in creating shared mental models by creating a strong *organizational climate*. This argument is based on Bowen and Ostroff’s (2004) notion that HRM systems in general help instill an organizational climate in which individuals share a common perception of what kinds of behaviors are

expected and rewarded. What kind of an organizational climate is created naturally depends on what is emphasized in the HR practices. Thus, it can be stated that barring ‘flexible work assignments’, all of the HR practices of interest can be utilized to create a climate for psychological safety and error management. As such, it is plausible that HPWPs could be configured to foster PI in this regard.

Decentralized decision making (DDM) refers to granting employees the authority and resources to make decisions. In addition, DDM entails less strictly defined tasks. (Evans & Davis, 2005) As control is defined as the possibilities to influence the sequence, time frame and content of one’s work tasks (Frese, 1989), it can reasonably be argued that employing DDM should increase possibilities for control, thus potentially affecting PI.

Similar to DDM, self-managed teams refer to increased autonomy and responsibility of teams, providing more possibilities for decision making to employees (Evans & Davis, 2005). Like DDM, relying on self-managed teams should thus increase control, resulting in improved PI.

Flexible work assignments represent possibilities to broaden one’s knowledge, skills and abilities through for example job rotation across teams, the ability to perform more than one job and job enrichment (Evans & Davis, 2005). The possibility to expand one’s KSA is quite obviously linked to PI, whereas e.g. taking on more responsibilities is characteristic of increasing the complexity of work. Thus, flexible work assignments should be linked to complexity and KSA.

Formalized training programs provided by an organization can also quite obviously increase the KSA of employees, thus increasing the propensity of initiative behaviors. In addition to task-specific or ‘technical’ skills, training in interpersonal skills could feasibly foster for example a climate for psychological safety, as previously noted.

Internal communication practices of an organization may have a rather profound effect on several PI antecedents. Particularly, organizational justice and its components are in essence *perceptions* that employees hold of the organization (Greenberg, 2006). Thus, no matter how fairly the organization actually treats its employees, failure to communicate can undermine justice perceptions. As such, organizational communication practices should affect initiative behavior through procedural and interactional justice.

Staffing procedures, especially when considering internal hiring, are also very conceivably linked to organizational justice. Extensive procedures to evaluate relevant

KSA to a particular job fit as well as utilizing performance-based promotions could understandably play an important part in creating distributive, procedural and even interactional justice. A lack of clear staffing procedures is perhaps more illustrative: if promotions do not seem to be based on any well-defined and transparent procedures, it is realistic to expect that employees feel as if they are treated in an unfair manner – as if one needed to be in an inner circle of some sort to progress within the organization. This also highlights the importance of clearly communicating internal job openings and staffing decisions. External hiring has implications on organizational justice perceptions as well. A plausible scenario would be one in which a position is filled from outside an organization, neglecting potential candidates in the existing workforce. This could quite understandably cause dismay and a sense of injustice in existing employees who may be suitable and willing to apply for the position. Apart from affecting organizational justice, staffing procedures can also support the flexibility of work assignments by e.g. providing a structure for accessing knowledge regarding possibilities for cross-team job enrichment. Thus, staffing procedures can also provide opportunities for increasing one's KSA as well as the complexity of one's job.

Finally, compensation practices in tandem with transparent communication is likely a way to further organizational justice. Clear compensation policies can be used as a gauge to assess whether the benefits one receives are indeed proportional to one's work input. Open communication about the policies – and in the extreme case, open access to salary and performance data – allows employees to assess procedural justice. Thus, compensation practices, together with open communication, should have an effect on PI through organizational justice.

This synthesis of high-performance work practices and the antecedents of personal initiative is integral for this thesis. Mostly neglected in academic literature, it attempts to show how organizations could design and utilize their HR practices with the intention of promoting initiative behavior. Table 4 outlines the relationships proposed in this chapter.

Table 4 – Hypothesized relationships between HPWPs and PIAs

HR Practice	Control	Complexity	Climate	PI antecedent			
				KSA	Distributive Justice	Procedural Justice	Interactional Justice
Self-managed teams	X		X				
Flexible work assignments		X		X			
Decentralized decision making	X		X				
Staffing		X	X	X	X	X	X
Training			X	X			
Compensation			X		X	X	
Communication			X			X	X

3 Data and Methodology

This chapter describes the data and methodology utilized in this study. First, the research questions, the case study method and the reasoning for choosing it as the method for this study are presented, followed by descriptions of the case company and the data collection method. Finally, additional information is given on how the sample for this study was chosen as well as on what kinds of actions were taken to ensure e.g. a sufficient degree of anonymity for the informants. For the sake of repetition, the research problem and objectives are re-presented:

The research problem of this study is:

What kinds of personnel support practices can companies utilize to foster personal initiative?

The formal objectives of this study are:

- O1:** *Uncovering how high-performance work practices can be utilized to foster personal initiative*
- O2:** *Understanding the case company's specific situation with regards to the activities discovered.*
- O3:** *Revealing what the most crucial aspects for fostering personal initiative in the case company are – what should be retained and what are the most critical improvement areas.*

3.1 Research questions

The research questions (RQs) of this study are derived from the research problem and objectives. RQ1 corresponds with the main objective of this study (O1), whereas RQ2 and RQ3 correspond with the secondary objectives O2 and O3, respectively.

***RQ1:** How can high-performance work practices foster personal initiative?*

***RQ2:** Which aspects of the case company's operations currently support PI and which aspects hinder it?*

***RQ3:** Which of these aspects are the most crucial to retain or resolve?*

3.2 The case study method

The research method of this thesis is the case study method. Several reasons, both theoretical and practical, justified this choice. On the theoretical side, as discussed in the literature review, there seems to be a gap in research which could be addressed. Namely, there exists scarce literature connecting high-performance work practices to proactive behaviors. Case study research, according to Eisenhardt (1989), is suitable for building new theories, based on empirical evidence from real-life cases. Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) note that the use of case study as a method is justified when a gap in research is identified. Furthermore, as studying high-performance work practices and antecedents of personal initiative in conjunction is still rather novel in the field of research, a qualitative study is quite justified. Thus, the case study method was deemed suitable for this thesis.

On a more practical note, Silvermann (2013) suggests that the choice of methodology should reflect what kind of knowledge the researcher wishes to gather. In addition, the methodology should also take into account available resources and personal preferences (Silvermann, 2013). In addition to increasing more profound theoretical knowledge, this thesis has a purpose of uncovering the dynamics of the case company's working environment as well as the attitudes, opinions and desires of its workforce. As such, a deeper understanding of this specific case was required. Thus, a qualitative study was clearly a justified choice in general, as in qualitative research the focus is on topics such as people's understanding and their interaction with each other, their environments and reality in general. (Silvermann, 2013)

3.3 The case company

The case company of this study is a Finnish software company that provides its customers software solutions for demand forecasting, inventory optimization and automated replenishment ordering. The case company has customers spanning retail, wholesale and manufacturing in a wide range of industries in several countries across Europe, Africa and the U.S. The case company has achieved and maintained rapid growth during recent years, both in terms of revenue and employee count. Thus far the case company has operated in a fashion typical of small to medium -sized enterprises: with little hierarchy, flexible ways of working and relying on self-starting, proactive and persistent teams and individuals. Consequently, the case company has only a few functions for employee support, as strategic development efforts have largely been dictated by customer operations as well as their direct impact on business.

At the core of the case company lies a desire to maintain a 'small company culture' despite its financial growth. Thus far, the case company has operated in a very *ad hoc* manner regarding any sort of human resource practices. As such, personnel support at the case company remains formally unorganized. However, the complexity brought on by especially an accelerating rise in employee count as well as international expansion have caused an increasing demand for employee support activities. This need for well-defined human resource practices is further accentuated by a relatively inexperienced management.

It has become evident that in order to retain employee satisfaction and performance, as well as in order to keep up with market demands, the case company as an organization needs a more structured approach to supporting its workforce. Herein lies a challenge – on the one hand there is a clear need for more formal procedures and practices, whereas on the other hand the *ad hoc*, low-hierarchy, informal nature associated with a small company culture is highly appreciated at the case company.

Finding an approach to employee support where these differing needs and desires are balanced is key to the case company's future success. The concept of personal initiative – work behavior characterized by its self-starting nature, proactive approach and being persistent in overcoming difficulties that arise in the pursuit of goals (Frese & Fay, 2001) – reflects what is deemed the behavior of a prototypical employee at the case company. The case company aims to increasingly rely on the initiative behavior of its employees in its operations in an effort to eliminate e.g. unnecessary managerial overhead.

Consequently, initiative behavior is also a point of interest from the perspective of developing efficient personnel support at the case company.

The main reason for choosing this specific company as the case of this study was that it operates in a business environment in which proactive employee behavior is increasingly important. The case company faces the world's largest IT-vendors head-to-head, competing for top-tier customers in large markets globally. Being a relatively small company by comparison, disruptive product innovation is absolutely crucial for the success of the company. The domain of supply chain and retail solutions management is extremely context-heavy, as each individual customer faces unique challenges, necessitating customized delivery projects and a highly capable workforce from service providers. Correspondingly, the general intent of the case company is to utilize modern management models, emphasizing employee autonomy and skill in favor of strict supervision and hierarchy. As such, the chosen company is a prime example of a company for which personal initiative of the workforce is of utmost importance. This company was also a convenient choice, as at the time of this study it was beginning to formally define its approach to human resource management. Thus, it was of interest for the company to accommodate a research such as this, which would enable it to align its emerging personnel support practices to foster initiative behaviors.

It should also be noted that at the time of this study, the researcher was employed by the case company. The above description of the company's intents with regards to managerial models etc. is principally a personal testimony of the researcher, based on discussions and observations made in daily work. The fact that the researcher was also an employee at the case company might also have an effect on the quality of data, as most of the informants were familiar with the researcher. This is assessed in more detail in Chapter 5.

3.4 Theme interviews

The data collection method of this study was theme interviews, which is a sub-type of semi-structured interviews. According to Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2008), the theme interview is a specific version of semi-structured interviews, where certain topics or predefined themes are covered. The purpose of the themes is to provide a general structure to the interviews, while the actual discussion is allowed to progress in a natural, free-flowing manner within each theme. Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2008) identify five

key characteristics of research interviews: 1) the interview is planned beforehand by the interviewer, 2) it is initiated and guided by the the interviewer, 3) the interviewer often needs to motivate and maintain the interview, 4) the interviewer knows their role and the informant learns and acknowledges theirs, and 5) the informants needs to trust in the confidentiality of the interview. These aspects were considered in carrying out the interviews. As the nature of this study is quite explorative, the sample size is small and the data collection method is interviewing, the interviews relied on open-ended questions, as suggested by Silvermann (2013).

The theme interview structure was developed based on the research questions. The interview themes were made in both English and Finnish, and are presented in Appendices 1 and 2, respectively. The first objective in the interviews was to form an understanding of what the informant's working tasks and practices are, so that the interviewer could grasp the context and its details. After a generic idea of what kind tasks and routines the informant faced on a daily basis was formed, the researcher asked clarifying, often rather emergent questions on how the informant then perceives their daily work – what kinds of problems the informant encounters, how are these issues solved, what kinds of opinions does the informant have on the current ways of working, what their personal needs and tendencies are, and how well do the current ways of working cater to those needs, for example. Natural points of interest were the high-performance work practuces as well as antecedents of personal initiative outlined in Chapter 2. As per the research questions, this strategy was employed in order to understand what the actual state of HPWPs is at the case company, and to discover how employees perceived the more personal PIAs. In other words, employees provided a description of the case company's high-performance work practices, followed by a narrative of their own thoughts about the effects of the HPWPs on themselves as well as on other workmates. This allowed for the analysis of both the more objective HPWPs as well as the PIAs.

3.5 Procedure for choosing informants

The main data source for this thesis is theme interviews conducted with 20 employees of the case company. The goal of the employee interviews is naturally to generate data to answer the research questions: what is currently supporting and hindering PI (Frese & Fay, 2001), as well as what the most crucial development areas are at the case company

with regards to personnel support. However, it was deemed that the dispositional differences between informants should be accounted for. Proactive personality is defined as the relatively stable tendency to enact proactive behavior, relatively unconstrained by situational forces (Bateman & Crant, 1993). This raised a concern: it was posited that people highly proactive by 'nature' are inherently less dependent on organizational support to begin with. Consequently, interviewing only such employees would not yield comprehensive data on the shortcomings of current employee support, which would ultimately lead to a failure to answer all research questions. Thus, arbitrary selection of employees was considered unsuitable for this thesis, as it included the risk of neglecting less proactive personalities.

In order to reconcile this threat, it was decided that the proactivity disposition of potential informants would be measured. In doing so, the differences in personality could be accounted for. Knowing informants' personal tendency for proactivity could also enable a more in-depth analysis of results. To gain yet more intricate insight, the personal initiative behavior of potential informants was also measured, thus arriving at the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 3 – a 2 by 2 matrix constructed by the researcher to assist in choosing informants, ensuring diversity in the sample.

The rationale behind this approach was that as is evident based on the literature presented in Chapter 2, possessing a certain personality trait does not necessarily translate into specific behavior. More precisely, being proactive by 'nature' does not ensure initiative behavior – other factors may inhibit taking initiative. Conversely, an individual exhibiting initiative behavior does not necessitate that they possess a proactive personality – positive reinforcement from the environment may compensate a low proactive personality to achieve a higher-than-expected level of PI.

As previously established, proactive personality is an antecedent of personal initiative: people with highly proactive personalities can be expected to exhibit more personal initiative and vice-versa. However, as such is to be expected, it was hypothesized that more interesting data could be collected from people whose behavior was contradictory to their personality. In context, low proactive personalities displaying high PI are somehow able to 'overcome' their natural comfort zone. Conversely, displays of little PI from inherently proactive people are a sign of e.g. hindering conditions in the environment or lacking knowledge, skills and abilities. This can be interpreted so that people residing in the upper-left quadrant in Figure 3 could be able to reveal what is done exceptionally well at the case company, whereas people in the lower-right quadrant might shed light on what is terribly wrong, demotivating or missing. Thus, considering

PI and proactive personality together has the potential to achieve a better fidelity of analysis.

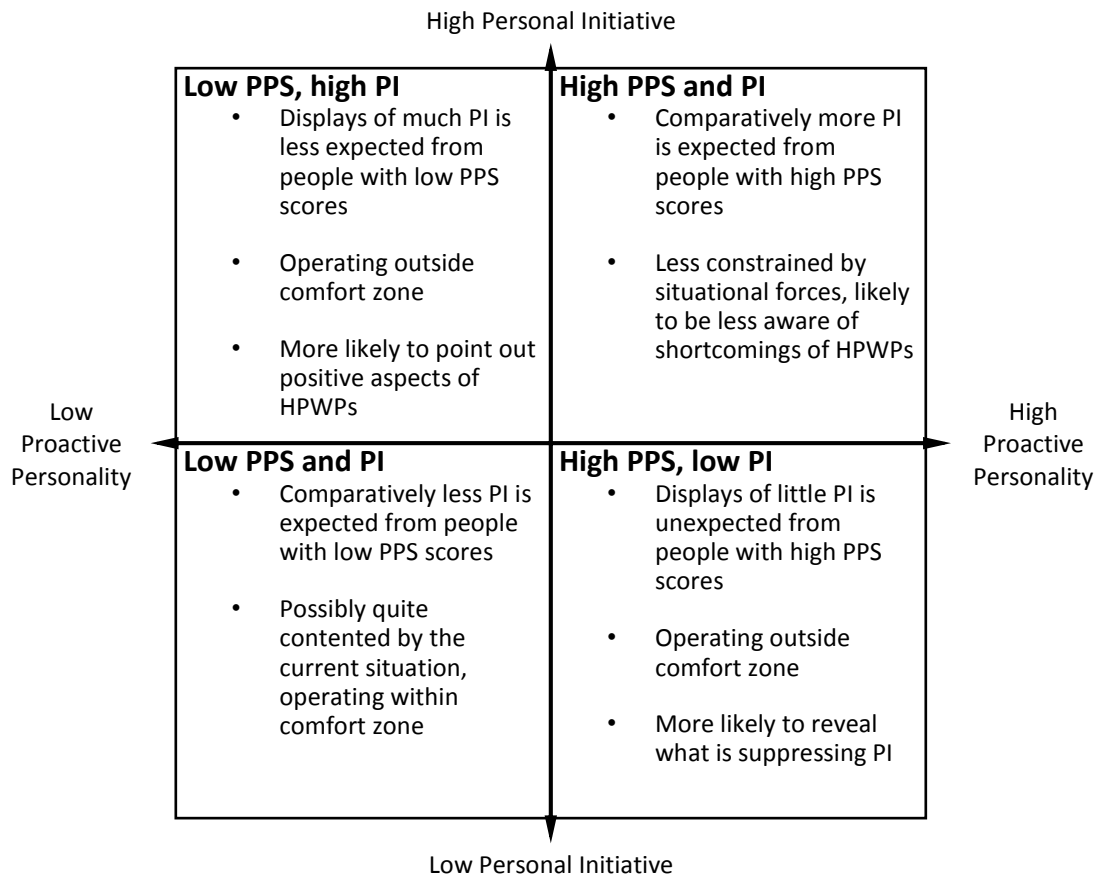


Figure 3 – A 2 by 2 framework of PPS vs. PI with implications regarding informants

In order to measure PI and proactive personality, an online survey was sent to all employees of the case company, 185 in total. Proactive personality was measured using the *proactive personality scale* (Bateman & Crant, 1993). The proactive personality scale (PPS) consists of 17 questionnaire items, each scored on a 7-point Likert scale. The personal initiative of employees was measured with the Situational Judgement Test on Personal Initiative (Bledow & Frese, 2009). In addition to these measures, satisfaction to employee support was also measured with single 7-point Likert scales, distinguishing between support for daily work and support for personal development on three levels: supervisory support, support from team mates and support from the whole organization. Open questions to each of these 6 areas were included in the survey. The reason for gathering data on employee satisfaction was to provide immediate insights for the case

company regarding their employee perceptions, as well as a grievance channel for employees. The survey gathered a total of 114 responses, producing a response rate of 61,6%. The reliabilities of the measures were assessed with Cronbach's alpha, revealing an acceptable internal consistency for PI ($\alpha = .727$) and good consistency for PPS ($\alpha = .871$).

Although there are other personality traits which are linked to personal initiative (Frese & Fay, 2001), proactive personality was the sole trait to be measured for several reasons. There were two reasons for accounting for only one personality trait. The first and foremost reason was research economy: in order to keep the survey as light as possible, it was decided that only one personality trait should be measured. Keeping the survey light and quick to complete was considered important to ensure a high response rate. Second, it would have been difficult to account for variance across multiple variables due to the relatively small amount of interviews that were to be conducted. In addition to the level of PI and PPS, the functional teams within the case company as well as the different office locations were taken into account. Ensuring a wide coverage of these attributes with 20 informants was already a challenge, and as such measuring more than one personality trait was regarded counter-productive. As for why specifically proactive personality was measured instead of other traits, Parker et al. (2006) identify proactive personality as the most relevant trait antecedent of proactive behaviors. As personal initiative is in essence a specific form of proactive behavior, proactive personality was chosen as the single dispositional variable to be measured in the survey.

Each respondent was assigned a unique, randomly generated identifier code to ensure anonymity to the researcher. A list of respondents, paired with their respective identifier codes was sent to this thesis' instructors. For the purpose of selecting informants, the researcher divided the anonymous identifier codes into the four quadrants depicted in Figure 3. The division was done based on the overall average of all respondents' PI and PPS scores: respondents who scored above the average in both PI and PPS were placed into the upper-right quadrant, and so on. Each respondent's Pythagorean distance to the averages was calculated, and the list of identifier codes in each quadrant was sorted accordingly. The Pythagorean distances of respondents reflect how close they are to case company's average. In other words, a short distance signifies a more 'typical' employee, whereas a long distance is characteristic of an exceptional employee with regards to personal initiative and proactive personality. The resulting four lists were stripped of information regarding their correspondence with specific quadrants. These sorted lists

of anonymous codes were then sent to the thesis' instructors, who then selected 5 informants from each list, ensuring that:

- a) Extreme observations as well as closer-to-average respondents were selected
- b) Each functional team within the case company was covered, as well as possible
- c) Different offices of the case company were covered, as well as possible.

The instructors of this thesis then compiled a single, randomly ordered list of 20 respondents, which was sent to the researcher. This list represented the employees that were to be interviewed. This procedure ensured that the researcher had no information regarding the PPS nor the PI score of any specific informant. This was regarded crucial, as it protected the researcher from bias during the interviews. In addition, this procedure allowed a level of anonymity for the respondents with regards to the instructors – the instructors would only know who within the company were more or less alike, but not the specific quadrant to which the respondents belonged into.

As a result of the procedure described above, the backgrounds of the informants were quite varied. All major functional teams in the case company were covered ranging from sales to project delivery to software development. Informants came from five different offices, thus providing an adequate coverage from the case company's perspective. Tenure in the case company ranged from just 3 months to 5 years and 4 months, and thus the group of informants possessed the capability to provide the viewpoints of both newer and more experienced employees. The median tenure of the group was 1.5 years. The case company was not able to provide data regarding the informants' ages. Based on the researcher's estimate, the informants' ages ranged between 20 and 50 years. As such, insights could be gathered both from young employees in the early stages of their careers, as well as from experienced professionals. The age of the informants is not considered significant in this study *per se*, but serves as an approximate measure of overall work life experience. Overall work life experience has some implications in interpreting the data, which will be assessed in more detail in Chapter 5. Due to confidentiality constraints, more detailed information on the informants may not be disclosed. Also due to confidentiality, when direct quotes are presented, only randomly assigned interview numbers will be provided as citations (for example, *Int1*). As such, statements from the same interview can be distinguished, while still maintaining anonymity.

3.6 Conducting the interviews

Before the actual interviews, as suggested by Eskola and Suoranta (2014), a rehearsal interview was conducted with an acquaintance of the researcher in order to familiarize the researcher with the interview setting as well as to get feedback and potentially refine the interview structure. Afterwards, a total of 20 actual interviews were conducted. The details of the selection process were presented in Chapter 3.5. It should be noted that most informants were more or less familiar with the researcher, who was also employed by the case company at the time of this study. This had mostly positive effects on the data collection: it was relatively easy to schedule interviews, and informants seemed to be quite trusting and thus discussed even sensitive topics openly. All interviews were conducted within the span of four weeks. All interviews except for one were recorded, due to request of the informant. Extensive notes were taken by the researcher during the interview which was not recorded. The recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher after all interviews were done. The notes and transcripts are not published in this thesis, since this would breach the pledge of confidentiality made towards the informants.

3.7 Data analysis

Overall this study followed a deductive approach. First, hypotheses about the relationships between HPWPs and PIAs (Table 4) were generated based on existing literature. Empirical data were collected, processed and finally utilized to support, reject or refine the hypothesized relationships. The following is a more detailed description of the analysis process.

The hypothesized model constructed in Chapter 2 served as the basis of analysis in this thesis. As previously noted, SHRM practices and HPWPs are considered conceptually equal in this thesis. What this means from a practical point of view is that both HPWP and SHRM practice terminology are used in the codifying of data as well as the analysis phase of this research. HPWPs are the primary point of interest, whereas SHRM practices – due to being mostly subsumed by HPWPs – are used to complement when needed. Due to significant overlap of the constructs, HPWPs are preferred when applicable. A comparable approach – using different terminology quite interchangeably – was utilized by e.g. Pfeffer (1998), as the different conceptualizations of HPWPs all tap

similar ideas about generating profits through the people of an organization, which is the case with SHRM practices and HPWPs as well.

The interview transcripts – in one case the interview notes – were scanned for experiences and opinions on the key concepts of HPWPs and PI. Two rounds of codification were carried out. During the first round, statements were coded using a pre-defined list of codes – namely, the codes consisted of the PI antecedents and HPWPs outlined in Table 4. The positivity and negativity of statements were also noted. This would allow first of all the analysis of the HPWPs in the case company as well as employees' perceptions on the antecedents of PI. Moreover, the comparison between HPWPs and employees' experiences could be assessed, i.e. whether or not the HPWPs seem to be connected to PI antecedents. After the first round of coding, however, it became clear that some codes were too broad to capture the essential information. A prime example is the HPWP code "communication", as problems related to vertical communications were quite different than those related horizontal communication. In addition, the existing codes failed to fully capture some emerging themes, such as helping behaviors. As such, a second iteration of coding was conducted with a revised code list.

The next step in the analysis was to count the occurrences of each code, such that the positive mentions were tallied separately from the negative ones. It became evident that the coding was done at such a granular level that the raw counts of mentions became rather high – in many cases, consecutive sentences were coded separately, even though they actually referred to the same real-life occasion. Due to this inflation, it was deemed more suitable to count the number of interviews in which each code was mentioned. In other words, the number of informants whose narratives contained at least one indication of a construct was considered essential.

The totals of the occurrences were then analyzed in conjunction with the model constructed in Chapter 2. An overall view on the results was formed, followed by a more detailed review of the individual themes and informant quotes. Specifically, attention was given to whether or not the results seemed to fit expectations that the model evoked. If, for example, *self-managed teams* and *decentralized decision making* would emerge as a positively perceived HPWP, one could expect *control* to be amongst the positively perceived results as well. On the other hand, attention was given also to conflicting results – if perceptions of *self-managed teams* and *decentralized decision making* would be prominently negative, a strong presence of *control* in the positively perceived results would be quite remarkable. Along the same line, a high amount of positive mentions of

control in the absence of *self-managed teams* and *decentralized decision making* would also warrant further questioning.

Finally, the research questions were answered based on the data. The model constructed in this thesis was scrutinized based on the analysis, validating relationship which gathered empirical support and disproving the ones that did not. The model was also refined according to results suggesting more complicated relationships. These considerations are presented more thoroughly in Chapter 5.

It should be noted that although the procedure for choosing informants would allow for comparing results between informants residing in the different quadrants depicted in Figure 3, the results were nonetheless assessed as a whole. There are two reasons for this. On one hand, the main purpose of the procedure for choosing informants was to *ensure rich and comprehensive data* with several perspectives and as little gaps as plausible, more so than to enable comparisons. On the other hand, the amount of respondents in each quadrant was still relatively small. Due to this rather miniscule sample size it was deemed that the reliability of comparisons would be too low to draw trustworthy conclusions. In the following chapter, the overall results are presented and the emerged individual themes are examined.

4 Results

The results of the interviews are presented in Table 5 and Table 6, containing positive and negative perceptions of HPWPs and PIAs, respectively. The tables depict the themes which consistently received attention from informants. The counts in the tables represent the total number of informants who during the interview mentioned the specific construct. Only themes which were mentioned by more than two informants are presented below and assessed in this thesis. The complete results are presented in Appendix 3.

Table 5 – Positively perceived HPWPs and PIAs

HPWP	Count	PIA	Count
Communication	14	Control	20
Decentralized decision making	14	Climate	17
Flexible work assignments	13	Complexity	13
Internal career opportunities	10	Psychological safety	12
Training	10	KSA	10
Appraisal measures	8	Error management	4

Table 6 – Negatively perceived HPWPs and PIAs

HPWP	Count	PIA	Count
Communication	19	Procedural justice	6
Appraisal measures	15	KSA	6
Job definitions	10	Control	4
Internal career opportunities	10		
Training	10		

A distinction between PI and HPWP concepts needs to be made for the sake of analysis. In general, HPWPs are regarded more objective qualities of the organization itself, whereas mentions of PI antecedents are more personal. A useful example of the distinction is that when a person is asked ‘what is your organization like’, they would seek to assess their organization more objectively and thus refer to HPWPs in their answer, whereas when asked ‘what is your personal experience’, a person would disclose how they feel personally, with less regard to the overall state of matters in their organization. Indeed, while considering HPWPs informants took on a broader perspective and assessed the situation of the case company in general, whereas discussion on PI antecedents tended to pertain a more idiosyncratic tone. Thus, mentions of HPWPs are considered to reflect the “actual” state of matters in the case company, whereas mentions of PI antecedents are considered to be a result from the HPWPs.

In the following sub-chapters, the results are interpreted in order to form an understanding of the state of HPWPs at the case company as well as the relationships between them and PI antecedents.

4.1 High-performance work practices

It is noteworthy that HPWPs were mentioned more often with negative context than positive. A particularly interesting finding is that *communication* was at the same time the most common positively perceived results (tied in mention count with decentralized decision making) as well as the most frequent negative perceived result. As mentioned before, this suggests that the code was too generic to describe the real underlying causes of satisfaction and dismay. Another such point of interest is the strong presence of *internal career opportunities* in both positively and negatively perceived results. Next, these discrepancies along with other prominent findings are examined in more detail.

4.1.1 Positively perceived HPWPs

As noted above, *communication* was highlighted as a strong suite at the case company, but due to it also being perceived as a weakness warrants a closer look. As it turns out, the positive mentions of communication tended to emphasize most of all the casual and flexible nature of communication with peers and superordinates. The following interview quotes illustrate:

“Information sharing and reporting is rather conversational, flat. I like it.” Int4

“Yes, we talk to each other [me and my supervisor]. It’s more casual though. I like the situation, because I don’t know if it would be useful to have fixed meetings. Because work weeks are so varied, it makes more sense to talk to each other when we have something to talk about rather than having fixed meetings.” Int10

“Compared to [my] previous jobs I am much less alone here, meaning that we communicate quite a lot, be it face-to-face or via messaging. -- a strong point is also our communication tool, [a specific chat software]. It is easy to gather information, discuss things and reach people pretty quickly” Int9

Decentralized decision making, tied-for-first in positive mentions, was mainly considered a positive at the case company. What was highlighted was not only the mandate to make decisions and define one’s own work tasks, but also that it is more or less explicitly expected of employees. This suggests that decentralized decision making is an integral part of how the case company operates, and that relying on it is a conscious choice by the management.

“In a sense initiative in creating your own job is expected, if you want to develop. It’s good – it’s consistent; ‘if you feel like this is something you should be doing, then do it.’” Int2

“I don’t really feel the need to ask for permission – as long as you feel that this is good for [our company] it’s okay.” Int3

“I don’t like to work under someone who always tells you what to do. I like to do what I think needs to be done, to rule over my own work day. I think I am allowed to do that here.” Int4

“Work is pretty autonomous, so you need to come up with things to solve. -- There is no higher authority telling you how things should be.” Int20

Flexible work assignments also emerged as a strong positive theme in the interviews. Many of the comments related also to decentralized decision making. This was not particularly surprising, since as is noted in Table 4, decentralized decision making and flexible work assignments are linked to control and complexity, respectively, which are typically grouped into a single construct, namely work characteristics. As they both represent opportunities for decision making, their overlap within informant comments is expectable.

“It’s absolutely fantastic that I can plan my work days and have the liberty to take on tasks which are not strictly from my own projects.”

Int6

“I have never had the feeling that I’m limited to one ‘job’ at [this company].” Int3

“You could easily jump into other [kinds of] work tasks if you wanted to. You can try different perspectives here – if you think that another job would suit you better, you usually get the opportunity to try it out and see how it goes. You have a chance to influence what you do here.” Int19

Internal career opportunities were mentioned as a positive in 10 interviews. Strikingly, they were also mentioned with negative context in 10 interviews. Five informants made both positive and negative statements. This quite mixed appraisal calls for some closer examination. Nevertheless, the following quotes highlight the positive aspects, whereas the negative assessments are studied further on. These quotes exemplify employees’ beliefs in that they have career advancement possibilities within the company:

“I have talked with [my supervisor] that I will not only work in [my current role] for the next 5 years. -- It was agreed upon that I can eventually proceed to other tasks.” Int15

“I think [this company] will grow and that I will grow with the company. I would probably not have chosen [this company] if I hadn’t seen that I could develop here.” Int10

“There has been talk of what the next step would be for me career-wise.” Int1

An interesting notion on internal career opportunities was that albeit employees have faith in their internal career opportunities, it was relatively unclear what those opportunities were. To illustrate:

“I don’t really know what I could specifically do here [in the future]. I mean, looking at what kinds of roles people have, like how diverse our project manager roles are, it is clear that there are possibilities. I think [future roles] will emerge from personal areas of interest. They will take shape somehow, perhaps.” Int7

Training was also amongst the positively perceived results on the HPWP side. Much of the comments dealt more with *informal training*, referring to learning that happens as they work on, instead of formal training sessions.

“Before starting work here my command line skills were at a pretty low level. Since then I have improved those skills a lot through working.” Int19

“During my first project I learned a lot during different phases. My skills have been evolving quite fast and I have been getting better and better.” Int13

Finally, *appraisal measures* were mentioned with positive tone by many informants, emerging mostly as comments on *feedback*. As with communication and internal career opportunities, however, appraisal measures amassed negative mentions as well. In fact, the negative mentions actually exceed the positive mentions in this case. These quotes demonstrate positive perceptions of appraisals:

“We do have development discussions where I receive more formal feedback. Every now and then I’d wish for something more systematic, but I think currently I do receive a sufficient amount of [continuous] feedback. I don’t know whether it should be more formal, though.” Int12

“At the moment I get a good amount of feedback, especially since in [my current project] there is a natural channel for that; [the project manager] does a good job at it.” Int7

“[Compared to previous jobs] I get more feedback on my work. I feel that I am being taken more into account as an individual because of that.” Int1

4.1.2 Negatively perceived HPWPs

As discussed earlier, *communication* was the top result in terms of negative mentions, attracting the attention of 19 informants. Many of the negative communication-related comments tended to revolve around poor communication of internal career opportunities.

“-- internal recruiting is entirely based on people taking initiative. We don't have systematic internal recruiting. A position kind of opens up and people don't know about it before it is already being filled. It might be external person or someone might ask someone “would you rather be doing that?” and then [all of a sudden], internal recruiting is done. And someone else may get disgruntled because they think ‘why wasn't I considered’”. Int2

“For example, there are new opportunities in the company. And only the people who have the personality and the network see the opportunity, and they take it and make a project out of it. -- So far it has been that officially everyone can develop, this [‘case company career path’] but I think it is not true for everybody, because it supports only the strong characters. I think the weak characters could do just as well as the strong ones, but they won't get to show it.” Int10

The above anecdotes illustrate that much of the dissatisfaction related to communication comes from a lack of transparency regarding *internal career opportunities*. A noteworthy concern is that apparent lack of transparency regarding career advancement might be a severe threat to company atmosphere. In addition, career advancement at the case company is largely tied to individual initiative, which involves a risk of exclusion for less proactive employees. Another aspect of communication and internal career opportunities was that it can be difficult for employees to foresee what kinds of opportunities might be in store for them:

“[What disturbs me is the thought] that people would do the same [job] for years without seeing where they are headed. At least in our team it is hard to say what could be the next job for you [within the company]. In my case, for example, if [my team leader] does not quit, I don’t really know how I could advance. I think others have difficulties seeing their possibilities, too.” Int14

A lack of formal *appraisals* also contributes to the problem – contrary to the positive mentions on appraisals, many informants felt that they received little feedback regarding their performance. Lack of appraisals was also seen as a cause for unclear expectations – some informants found it difficult to evaluate whether they were producing acceptable results, and whether they were on ‘the right track’. The poorly defined expectations and the absence of feedback seemed to be tied to the previously mentioned problem with internal career opportunities. The qualifications required for higher positions in the company were considered to be quite vague by informants, as new organizational roles are mostly created by the initiative-taking individuals, who subsequently assume the newly created roles.

“I don’t get any official rating or assessments. -- I think it would be good for people to get some feedback on where they are, what they could do better, to have a plan for the future based on what is expected of them – which should be clearer – so maybe using three categories: if you do this and this, you have reached expectations; do this and this you have exceeded expectations; do this and this and you have greatly exceeded expectations. Maybe something like that. I think it would be motivating if people knew where to go and what they need to achieve.” Int6

“I hope that [this company] can somehow be a bit more transparent when it comes to decision making. I also feel that there definitely are possibilities for everybody to pick and choose [their roles] but it needs to be more clearly defined what is expected of you so you can develop better.” Int3

“I don’t maybe know what is expected of me, with regards to getting a higher position. I’m happy to do things as I do them now, but it would be nice to know that this is actually leading somewhere.” Int3

Other communication problems were more diverse. Of these lesser problems, information sharing – communication within teams and team-to-team, overall vertical communication, to name a few – came up. Other problems included failure to give due credit to employees and lacking grievance channels.

“A lot of knowledge is in the heads of individuals, which may pose a threat if said people move on to other posts or even companies.” Int4

“There’s some duplicate work being done and redoing things which were not done sufficiently before [due to poor communication].” Int6

“I’m not sure if always the right people are [given credit] in the right place, for example in some cases, the silent people did at least the same amount [of work] as the loud people, but they are not [given any credit for it].” Int10

“There should be a person to go to with these issues. Someone responsible for taking care of you and giving you the information you need regarding such issues – your development, your paychecks, your travel expenses, insurances, pension. All these HR questions. Let’s say you had a problem with your country manager – who would you go to if you don’t have any HR personnel?” Int4

Job definitions were also a prevalent theme. Many comments show that better-defined job descriptions could be beneficial when starting at the case company. Unclear job definitions coupled with little coordination were seen as a cause for unnecessary work. In addition, loosely defined roles also seem to partially cause unclear expectations, potentially redoubling earlier problems. Informants noted that whereas these problems were mostly present in the early stages of their employment, certain issues still prevailed.

“When I was hired, neither I nor anyone else seemed to have any idea of what I was supposed to do. -- the job description was mostly undefined, I had to figure out what to do on my own.” Int5

“Especially in the beginning [of working at the case company] I was not really used to having to be responsible for coming up with stuff

to do and even my own development – it could be beneficial to have someone guide and coach you.” Int11

“-- people take on new tasks – [nobody knows] who is responsible for what, and a lot of duplicate work gets done.” Int14

Finally, both formal and informal *training*, as well as inadequate attention to personal development were arose as an improvement area. Employees desired training on both technical and other skills (e.g. interpersonal, generic working skills), trainings on specific softwares and certificate programs.

“It would be nice to have a possibility for a [customer relationship management software] clinic or agile project management training. We have so much documentation that you just can’t read everything. When I started, there was no onboarding, so maybe a possibility for older employees to go to an onboarding [would be beneficial]. Some clinics would be nice, where you can go with your problems etc. for [document management system] for example -- All these [newer employees] who have had onboarding know how to do these things way better [than older employees].” Int3

“It could be good to have trainings which have nothing to do with subject matter expertise, but focusing on how to develop as a person or as an employee. Some kind of ‘life coaching’ could be beneficial.” Int11

“I maybe expected that [the company would have] tools for personal development.” Int14

4.2 Personal Initiative antecedents

Despite the negative HPWP mentions outnumbering the positives, the imbalance is reversed when it comes to PI antecedents. In fact, the amount of negative mentions was far smaller than the amount of positive mentions, in contrast to the comparatively subtle unevenness of positive and negative HPWP mentions. Possible explanations for this are

assessed in Chapter 5. Another point worth noting is that contrary to HPWP results, overlap of positive and negative perceptions of specific PIAs was virtually non-existent.

4.2.1 Positively perceived PIAs

Control – employees’ perceptions of the degree to which they are able to define their sequence, time frame, and content of one’s work goals, on one’s work strategies, on feedback and on working conditions (Frese, 1989) – was clearly perceived in a positive manner, as every single informant gave statements of control with positive context. Unsurprisingly, many of the statements related to control contained hints of decentralized decision making as well. More or less all of the different aspects of control were present in the positive results.

“For example, you are not forced to do your tasks in a specific way, you can choose the order in which you carry out tasks, the tools you use etc.” Int1

“I can come in when I want and I do the stuff that I have planned for myself, I take initiative towards [my manager] and discuss things quite ad hoc, how to make things work [better] in the office etc.” Int6

“The way of working suits me very well – you can spend your time according to what you feel you need to do, be it self-education, doing some analysis or taking care of routine work.” Int7

“I like the flexibility with working times, home office etc. Also flexibility in that if you see something you don’t like, you can do something about it if it makes sense, I also like that a lot.” Int10

Climate, or atmosphere was also mentioned in the vast majority of interviews. Many these comments also included signs of psychological safety. In fact, almost all statements of psychological safety referred to organizational climate as well.

“People are open to discussion and open to hear other people out and maybe to even change their [own] mind. People are very interested in others’ well-being.” Int2

“The working environment is really nice, open and receptive. Even if you feel a bit dumb, you can always ask [‘stupid’ questions].” Int5

“I get to be myself, I don’t have to look out for what I say, no need to think about what someone else might think. I think what causes that is that everyone else is exactly who they are. Nobody will judge you, that creates a good atmosphere.” Int14

“It’s like working with a group of good friends.” Int19

In addition to hinting psychological safety, *error management* also emerged in tandem with descriptions of organizational climate.

“[There is no] finger-pointing or blaming. If there are issues, they are handled in a way so that we try to learn a lesson from it and move on.” Int2

Another rather strong positive result was *complexity* – the number of elements to be considered within the work context. Much of the statements on complexity had to do with opportunities to take on tasks or projects outside of what employees consider their own job.

“I was a part of a sales case. It was new and challenging, a very good learning experience. I like to be challenged and to be put in new situations. It took some time for me and I had to work a bit more for one week or so but I think it was worth it. Someone asked me to help, and it sounded fun and challenging.” Int13

“Honestly I never read what I should do in my contract, I just think about what needs to be done in the company. I think I just don’t like that things don’t work, I just try to fix it, I never ask if it’s my job or not. In my area, I think I have the possibility to do it. That’s the great thing about my job, if I have an idea and if it makes sense, then I can do it.” Int10

Knowledge, skills and abilities were mentioned in a positive manner in half of the interviews. Informants reflected on their KSA with several timeframes: in addition to considering current know-how, past learning and on-the-job skill acquisition was acknowledged. Informants also seemed confident that they will keep on improving their skills at the case company.

“My [company-specific] as well as general [subject matter] skills have improved through working here. I have also grown as an employee, learned about working methods and gained work-life skills.” Int5

“I consider my skills are at a pretty good level, but there’s still a lot to learn. -- you also get to develop yourself – it’s actually even encouraged that if you feel there’s a course you wish to take [not internally provided], there is a possibility for that.” Int11

4.2.2 Negatively perceived PIAs

As previously noted, negative mentions of PIAs were relatively scarce, with the most common construct attracting the attention of merely 6 informants. This particular PIA was *procedural justice*, with statements focusing mostly on the case company’s internal recruiting process.

“I think people are frustrated, because [career advancement] seems to be a bit unfair; some people get opportunities while others toil in the shades. -- There certainly are possibilities, but for some reason it looks like you should be in the right email chain or sit [with the right people] having a beer on a Friday evening in order to be able to tell what you would like to be doing.” Int14

“It was quite clear [in the case of some specific people], who I know have been aspiring to higher positions, but I am worried for other people, why were they not considered. It shouldn’t be [explicitly] communicated who others were considered, but it should be clearly stated why the specific people have been chosen. The ones who did not make should be told ‘this time you didn’t get the job because of these things, but if you do these things, we will definitely keep an eye on you next time,’ so that the people who were skipped know the

reasons, so they can relate to it. I am a bit worried that people get unhappy.” Int3

In addition to concerns about internal career opportunities, comments on procedural injustice touched upon a specific profit sharing incident:

“From what I’ve heard, it seemed that they rewarded people who have been in the company for a long time, and people don’t think that is a good basis to reward employees. It just doesn’t seem like a smart move. Of course, those people have also played an important part, but many others have as well.” Int6

“[Regarding] the options program I wondered ‘why are these people not there, why was this decision made that these people are there but others are not.’ -- if you are not an outgoing person but do a really good job, you may just be overlooked if you are not actively going for a higher up position. At the moment, you need to drive for it yourself – you won’t make it if you ‘just’ do a good job.” Int3

“The options program certainly caused an uproar in our team. Don’t get me wrong, I think the people who were rewarded do deserve it, but during the presentation I was expecting that the next slide would explain how anyone could get included. That slide never came. I didn’t expect to be included myself, but I feel upset that everyone else was left in the dark.” Int14

Knowledge, skills and abilities gathered negative mentions in 6 interviews, tying procedural justice. Critique related to KSA focused more on how the case company could better support employees’ development, instead of purely negative assessments of actual know-how. Quite expectedly, these comments also included negative mentions of HPWPs, such as appraisal measures and training.

“It’s hard to develop when you don’t know what you could do better, that’s something that is missing. -- It would be nice to receive constructive feedback for personal development.” Int3

“I’d like to have feedback on for example what I could do better in presentations with the customer, how I handle meetings – is there

*anything in the way I talk, could I challenge them even better.
Debriefings after meetings will take a bit of time but I think it could
be very beneficial.” Int6*

Control, in addition to being the topic with most positive mentions, also received some criticism. Negative comments on control did not, however, contradict the positives. Negative notions of control were more situational, with informants feeling that e.g. their current workload hindered them from being in control of their work tasks. In addition, opportunities to influence larger-scale development of the company were identified as an area with improvement needs.

*“I have a list of things that I would love to do and what I think are
important, that I started back in 2014. But basically I never get to
those since new tasks are constantly coming in.” Int2*

*“I feel I can influence the amount of free time I have, as well as team
spirit, but I think I have little tools to influence bigger things. I think
we need some kind of an HR function, someone with whom you
could discuss personal development and personnel development on
the long-haul, etc.” Int14*

4.3 Additional findings

In addition to referring more or less directly to high-performance work practices or antecedents of personal initiative, two additional themes emerged. Namely, an apparent *climate of helping* was mentioned in by a total of 17 informants, whereas 10 discussed a *general feeling of being trusted* in the company. These themes are absent in the literature on personal initiative. As such, their effects of personal initiative are currently unknown.

*“I think it’s a quite nice environment where everyone supports each
other. I don’t think I have ever been scared to ask [for help]. I think it
works very well.” Int4*

*“I think every person at [the case company] is really happy to help.
That’s partly [because of] recruiting, but also a lot about the culture
that we have been able to create. I feel that since I’ve been here the
longest I get most of the questions, and that it’s up to me to keep up*

that culture. I try to make myself as available as possible to others – that’s a good thing. That sort of thinking is instilled when people start here, people are always happy to help, face-to-face and on Flowdock as well.” Int18

“I’m pretty much autonomous, and I’m given enough trust to do that. That’s a massive plus for [the case company] – I don’t think there are many shackles, it’s more about empowering [people].” Int18

“On a practical level one of the good things is that you are trusted [here]. You can come and go as you like, but [others] know that I do a job.” Int14

5 Discussion

In this chapter the results are combined with the underlying literature. The theoretical framework constructed in Chapter 2 will be utilized to present and further analyze the accumulated data. Results which are inconsistent or even contradictory with the initial model are presented in order to draw attention to which aspects of the model might need further refining. On the other hand, results which support the hypothesized relationships are also assessed in detail. The practical implications of the results from the case company's perspective are also presented, followed by an assessment of the validity of this thesis.

As a review, the research problem and research questions are re-presented below:

The research problem of this study is:

What kinds of personnel support practices can companies utilize to foster personal initiative?

This study approached the research problems through

RQ1: *How can high-performance work practices foster personal initiative?*

RQ2: *Which aspects of the case company's operations currently support PI and which aspects hinder it?*

RQ3: *Which of these aspects are the most crucial to retain or resolve?*

5.1 Reviewing the theoretical model

The backbone of the analysis in this study was the theoretical model constructed in Chapter 2. The model synthesizes research on personal initiative (Frese & Fay, 2001; Frese et al., 1997, 1996) and high-performance work practices (Evans & Davis, 2005). The particular focus of the model is on the relationships between HPWPs and the distal antecedents of PI – work characteristics as well as knowledge, skills and abilities (Frese

& Fay, 2001), organizational climates regarding psychological safety (Baer & Frese, 2003) and error management (Fay et al., 2004; van Dyck et al., 2005), and organizational justice (Greenberg, 2006; López-Cabarcos et al., 2015).

The empirical data gathered for this study present an opportunity to scrutinize the constructed theoretical model. Contradicting or inconsistent results are particularly interesting in assessing whether the hypothesized relationships presented in Table 4 exist or not. Another important consideration is whether other, previously unidentified relationships might exist. In the following, the results of this study are utilized to assess the credibility of the model, providing possibly necessary refinements.

Based on the results, communication was quite interestingly perceived in both positive and negative ways. A closer examination of the data revealed, however, that the positive notions were qualitatively somewhat different from the negative ones. The positive comments seemed to be related to organizational climate as well as psychological safety, whereas the negative comments revolved more around a lack of transparency with regards to internal career opportunities, profit sharing and compensation. Other themes which received contradictory comments were also present, namely training and appraisal measures. This raises two key considerations. On a practical level, these discrepancies may be a signal of inconsistencies in the way the case company operates. This may be a symptom of the case company's relatively young and inexperienced management and undeveloped support structures – both from the viewpoint of managers and subordinates. It is reasonable to expect that employee perceptions would differ across teams when a structured approach to managing is largely non-existent. Manager- and team-specific differences might be more likely to emerge when company-wide approaches to operations do not exist. A more structured system could help to reduce such variance and provide all employees a more uniform experience. On a more theoretical note, it may well be that communication is actually more of a moderating factor instead of being 'equal' with other HPWPs in the model depicted in Table 4. If this were the case, poor communication could thwart an otherwise stellar high-performance work system. It seems clear that the case company indeed has trouble with internal communication. Even if internal career opportunities and training opportunities were abundant, communication failures could easily distort employee perceptions and lead to a belief that such opportunities do not exist. It should also be pointed out, that these two alternative explanations are not mutually exclusive – communication being a moderating factor does not imply that there could not exist differences in the state of HPWPs between different teams the company, for example. Figure 4 depicts the model

with communication serving also as a moderating factor between HPWPs and PIAs. To emphasize, in the revised model it is expected that communication does not *mediate* between HPWPs and PIAs, but *moderates the path between the two constructs* in addition to having a direct effect on PIAs, like other HPWPs.

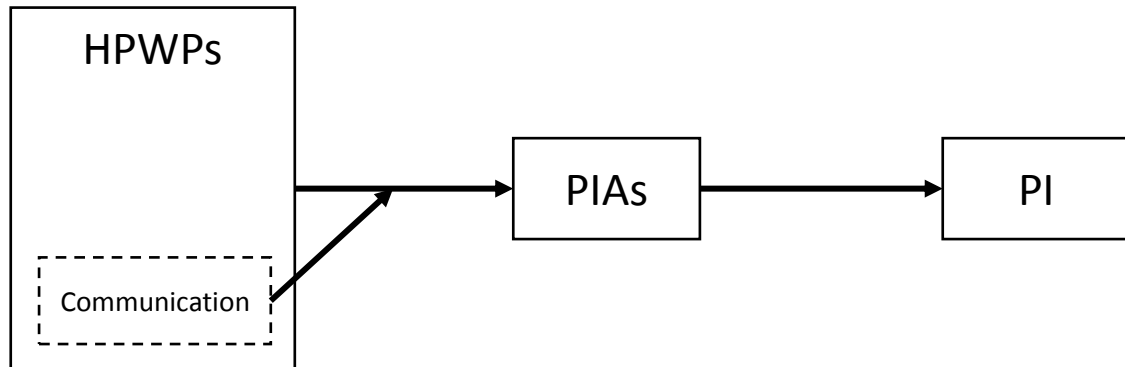


Figure 4 – A revised model: communication moderating between HPWPs and PIAs

Bowen and Ostroff (2004) provide support for the model depicted in Figure 4, where communication moderates the impact of HPWPs on PIAs. They argue that HRM practices in and of themselves *are communication* towards employees. In essence, each HRM practice conveys some sort of a signal which individuals then interpret. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) identify a set of features of HRM systems which ultimately affect how effective the system is, and how coherent the workforce's perception of desired behaviors is. Two such features seem to provide a degree of explanation to the inconsistent employee perceptions in the case company, namely *visibility* and *instrumentality*. Visibility, as its name suggests, refers to the degree to which HRM practices are salient and readily observable (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). In the current study, several informants noted that career advancement and internal recruiting procedures were murky at best, and felt that employees in general lack understanding of how such decisions are made, for instance. On the other hand, instrumentality refers to establishing unambiguous cause-effect relationships with regards to an HRM system's desired behaviors and employee consequences (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Again, in this study some informants noted that while they agreed that certain others had deserved promotions, they were not thoroughly convinced that they themselves would receive rewards of the same caliber if they delivered comparable performance. This would hint that significant ambiguity and poor visibility afflict the case company's personnel practices. The aforementioned undeveloped structures and inexperienced management of the case company are likely the cause of these shortcomings. In addition, it is worth noting that ambiguity

and visibility seem to connect to perceptions of *organizational justice* (Greenberg, 2006) – ambiguity and lacking visibility could understandably fuel distributive, procedural and interactional injustice perceptions.

5.2 Results aligned with the model

Decentralized decision making and flexible work assignments (Evans & Davis, 2005) were consistently considered in a positive manner by informants. In light of this, as was predicted by the original theoretical model described in Chapter 2, the emergence of control and complexity – jointly called work characteristics (Frese & Fay, 2001) – was expected. The positive views on internal career opportunities (Evans & Davis, 2005) were also predicted to further complexity. An interesting notion about internal career opportunities was that negative comments were more focused on larger-scale career advancements, whereas positive comments tended to revolve around more minute developments, such as job enrichment, which is more characteristic of complexity. Self-managed teams (Evans & Davis, 2005) – also a predicted antecedent of work characteristics – was not present in the findings, neither positive nor negative. Overall, this result provides support for the hypothesized model.

Knowledge, skills and abilities were mentioned (Frese & Fay, 2001) with both positive and negative contexts in the interviews. Seeing that flexible work assignments, internal career opportunities and training should be connected to KSA, this result makes sense: flexible work assignments were a clear positive result, whereas opinions on internal career opportunities and training were rather bipolar. Thus, it could be expected that KSA would also receive both positive and negative mentions. The overall positive inclination of KSA is also sensible, as the total amount of positive mentions of flexibility, internal career opportunities and training exceed the negatives, although this interpretation is rather speculative due to the explorative nature of this research. These results do, however, suggest that the hypothesized relationships in question may well be valid.

Then again, training (Evans & Davis, 2005) was also prevalent in the negative results. There was a clear distinction between the positive and the negative mentions of training. Positive comments referred mostly to good opportunities to develop ‘on the job’, whereas negative comments tended to be quite explicit, with employees directly indicating desires for formal training sessions on a multitude of topics. Seeing that the positive and

negative mentions where qualitatively somewhat different helps to explain why reviews of KSA were mixed – while working tasks provide good opportunities for learning on a casual basis, more deliberate means for employee skill development are still largely absent. It should also be noted that many of the employees who mentioned training with a positive tone were relatively new at the company, and younger in general. This most likely has an effect on their perception – it is understandable that young employees with shorter tenure, many of them in their first or second job (after graduation), would be content with their working situation since much of what they are doing is new to them. As such, there would be less need to emphasize training for them, and consequently lacking employee development procedures would not be a concern for them.

As previously noted, internal career opportunities were amongst both the top positive as well as negative results. Internal career opportunities (staffing) were predicted to be linked to all PIAs barring control (Table 4). Whereas the effects of internal career opportunities on control and KSA were assessed above, two additionally interesting results emerged – the overwhelmingly positively perceived organizational climate (Schneider, 1990) and the tied-for-first negatively perceived result, procedural justice (Greenberg, 2006). Drawing from the model, procedural justice appraisals were expected to be related to communication and compensation in addition to internal career opportunities. It seems fitting that much of the negative comments on communication dealt with poor visibility of career opportunities. Related to compensation, an incident regarding an options program was a cause for negative comments on both profit sharing and communication. Considering these jointly, the emergence of procedural injustice perception seems quite logical.

Organizational climate, on the other hand, seems to be largely unaffected by the negative views on many HPWPs. Of the hypothesized HPWPs affecting climate, only decentralized decision making was a clear positively perceived result. Internal career opportunities, training, communication and even compensation received at least some amount of negative attention. The strong presence of organizational climate in the positive mentions – with mentions in 17 of the 20 interviews – is thus quite perplexing. As briefly touched upon earlier, the negative comments on communication were somewhat different from the positives. Negative comments were mostly about internal career opportunities, but positive comments on communication highlighted the casual nature of communication, psychological safety (Baer & Frese, 2003) and a culture of helping instead. This partly helps explain how it is possible that organizational climate was viewed near-unanimously in positive manner. It seems to be that the positive aspects

of communication as well as decentralized decision making simply outweigh the negatives. On the other hand, it may also be that the link between climate and compensation, career advancement and competence development is weaker than expected. In other words, perception of organizational climate may be more dependent on collectivistic circumstances, such as common ways of working and relationships between people, instead of more individualistic incentives such as career development. This notion would also make sense from the viewpoint of self-determination theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 2000). From an SDT standpoint, it could be argued that decentralized decision making fits *the need for autonomy*, career development fits *the need for competence* and organizational climate fits *the need for relatedness*. Considering that these represent three disparate dimensions of motivation, it is not unreasonable to assume that they manifest in different ways. Thus, as the results contradict the formulated theoretical model, they provide crucial insights on how the model might need to be adjusted in the future.

Appraisal measures also received both positive and negative responses. The positive and negative accounts of appraisals were somewhat similar in content – for instance, whereas some employees seemed to be pleased with formal employee evaluations, others felt that such procedures are missing at the case company. It may well be that there are local, team-specific differences in performance evaluations within the company. As discussed previously, the undeveloped state of the case company's management system may be a cause for this disagreement in the results.

5.3 Addressing inconsistent and unexpected results

Much of the results of this study were expected, in the sense that they seemed to fit the theoretical model constructed in Chapter 2. However, some of the results were in disagreement with the hypothesized relationships between HPWPs and PIAs. An example of such a disagreement is that a HPWP would have been considered negatively while the PIAs linked to the HPWP would have been perceived positively, or vice-versa. Additionally, a positively perceived PIA would also be considered unexpected if the HPWPs linked to it received no mentions at all. In this chapter, these inconsistent and unexpected results are assessed in detail.

5.3.1 Internal balance of the results

The overall balance of positive and negative comments in the interviews was somewhat slanted towards the negatives. Looking at the results more closely, separating HPWP results from PIA results, more interesting information is revealed. HPWP results were more negative-oriented, and received more attention overall – both positive and negative – whereas PIA results were heavily positively biased, gathering only a handful of negative mentions. This calls for some additional consideration, both on the results themselves, as well as on the reliability of this study. In the following, these discrepancies and imbalances are assessed in an effort to provide more context to this study and its role in the case company, as well as insight to future endeavors. To re-iterate, the results are once more summarized in Figure 5, where the positively and negatively perceived themes regarding high-performance work practices and antecedents of personal initiative are arranged into a 2 by 2 matrix.

	HPWP	PIA
Positive	Communication Decentralized decision making Flexible work assignments Internal career opportunities Training Appraisal measures	Control Climate Complexity Psychological safety KSA
Negative	Communication Appraisal measures Job definitions Internal career opportunities Training	Procedural justice KSA Control

Figure 5 – Summary of empirical results

This study served as the first attempt at the case company to assess the state of high-performance work practices and figure out which of them should be emphasized, which should be corrected and developed, and in some cases, founded.

From the case company's point of view this study also served as a message to its employees; that the company is truly interested in taking employees' opinions into account when designing its future ways of operating. The underlying rationale of this was that although a workforce displaying great amounts of personal initiative is desirable at the case company, seeking to increase PI before a comprehensive understanding of HPWPs and how they affect PI is obtained is quite like shooting in the dark. Thus, the research questions were designed to accentuate work practices over PIAs, and the interview questions consequently emphasized HPWPs over PIAs.

It is interesting how perceptions of HPWPs were more negative than positive, but perceptions of PIAs, which should be a result of HPWPs, were nevertheless very positive. Seeing that this study was in a way the first opportunity for employees to voice their concerns about the case company's way of operating, it was reasonable to expect that emphasis was given to the development areas. Several informants commented during the interviews how glad they were that this study was being made, underlining that such a grievance channel was called for. As an anecdotal support for this, several informants mentioned how they saw the interview as a great opportunity to 'vent' – some informants were glad that they finally got the chance to open up and discuss difficult topics, criticizing the way the case company operates. The scarcity of negative PIA mentions can actually be taken as evidence for this – even though employees felt it was important to highlight what they felt was wrong at the case company, the shortcomings of HPWPs did not fully translate into PIAs in the results. This can be interpreted so that much of the negative comments stemmed more from the opportunity to criticize the case company, instead of accurately describing the work environment. This does not mean that the negative results should be overlooked – just that the case company's situation is not as dire as the data imply at first glance. Indeed, many informants noted that the situation is not as bad as they make it sound. Some informants even explicitly pointed out that that they wanted the interviewer to specifically understand that a clear majority of the case company's operating is top-grade, and that the concerns they raised represented a minority. As was mentioned in Chapter 3.5, the proactive personality scale and personal initiative scores of individuals might have affected the responses they discussed. As such, some of the inconsistencies in the results may be due to differences in informants' perceptions: more proactive people, who are relatively unconstrained by situational

forces (Bateman & Crant, 1993) might be less inclined to identify potential flaws or shortcomings in HPWPs. Thus, their responses might skew the results.

5.3.2 Absent themes

In addition to the above considerations, four themes did not emerge in the results. Namely, self-managed teams as well as distributive and interactional justice did not receive attention from the informants, at least consistently. Self-managed teams were hypothesized to be linked to control, whereas staffing (internal career opportunities) were proposed to be linked to both distributive and interactional justice. In addition, compensation (profit sharing) was expected to be linked to distributive justice and communication to interactional justice. Since control emerged as a positively perceived result, one could have thus expected to find self-managed teams as a strong positive as well. However, the rather strong presence of decentralized decision making in the positive results may be the cause for this absence. Possible explanations for this include that the importance of decentralized decision making was much more important to the informants than self-managed teams. On the other hand, it may also be that these constructs are somewhat overlapping. Internal career opportunities, communication and profit sharing were among negatively perceived results. As such it is somewhat surprising that distributive and interactional injustice did not emerge in the as negatives in the results. Then again, procedural justice was also hypothesized to be linked to each of the three HPWPs mentioned above. As such, it seems plausible that informants were not displeased with their compensation in relation to other employees (distributive justice) nor with the way their superiors treat them (interactional justice), but rather they were simply unsatisfied with the general procedures of communication, compensation decisions and career advancement practices (procedural justice). Again, these explanations are not necessarily conflicting, as they reflect different dimensions of organizational justice. To reiterate, it seems that the informants felt that their superiors were not to blame *per se*, and that they were compensated appropriately, but that the case company would need to develop the procedures managers comply to.

5.3.3 Considerations regarding the constructed model

Finally, it needs to be pointed out that the model constructed in this study is still tentative. The role of this study in academic research is to merely provide a starting point

for further research on the relationship between strategic human resource management and proactive behaviors. This study provides some evidence for the existence of the interrelatedness of the constructs examined, but more thorough research, perhaps with quantitative methods, is needed to fully understand the relationships proposed in this study. Some interesting conflicts also surfaced, for example, the weaker-than-expected relationships between organizational climate and internal career opportunities. These conflicts represent opportunities to further refine the model and encourage more rigorous testing. In other words, it may well be that some of the hypothesized relationships between high-performance work practices and personal initiative antecedents do not actually exist. In addition to the potential bias in the results due to the role of this study as an unofficial grievance channel, the lack of negative PIA mentions in the face of negative HPWP perceptions may also be due to currently unidentified intervening variables. In other words, factors that alleviate or 'buffer' the effects of HPWPs on PIAs that the researcher is unaware of may exist.

5.4 Practical implications

Figure 6 positions HPWPs and PIAs along one axis ranging from positive to negative, seeking to visualize the 'average' perception of the informants. Constructs found near the middle of the figure are those which received more mixed reviews, whereas constructs near the top or the bottom were more clearly perceived as positive or negative, respectively. It should be pointed out that this figure and the exact positioning of each concept within it are not meant to be an accurate representation of the results, but rather a rough visual guide concluding the essential findings. It should also be noted that the horizontal positions of the constructs are of no significance in Figure 6.

Decentralized decision making and *flexible work assignments* are quite clear strong points of the case company. Knowingly or unconsciously, the case company bases its ways of working on these two principles, the result of which seems to be high appraisals of *control* and *complexity* by employees. The researcher thus emphasizes that the case company should become wholly aware of this dynamic, so that it can continue to rely on this way of operating as it endeavors to foster personal initiative.

Climate and *psychological safety* were largely interlinked, clearly positive results. Notions of organizational atmosphere also revealed a strong *culture of helping and*

collaboration. From the perspective of personal initiative, especially psychological safety is a relevant element in the climate of an organization. Faint positive signals of *error management* were also found in this research. In these regards, the case company has a good basis for increasing personal initiative.

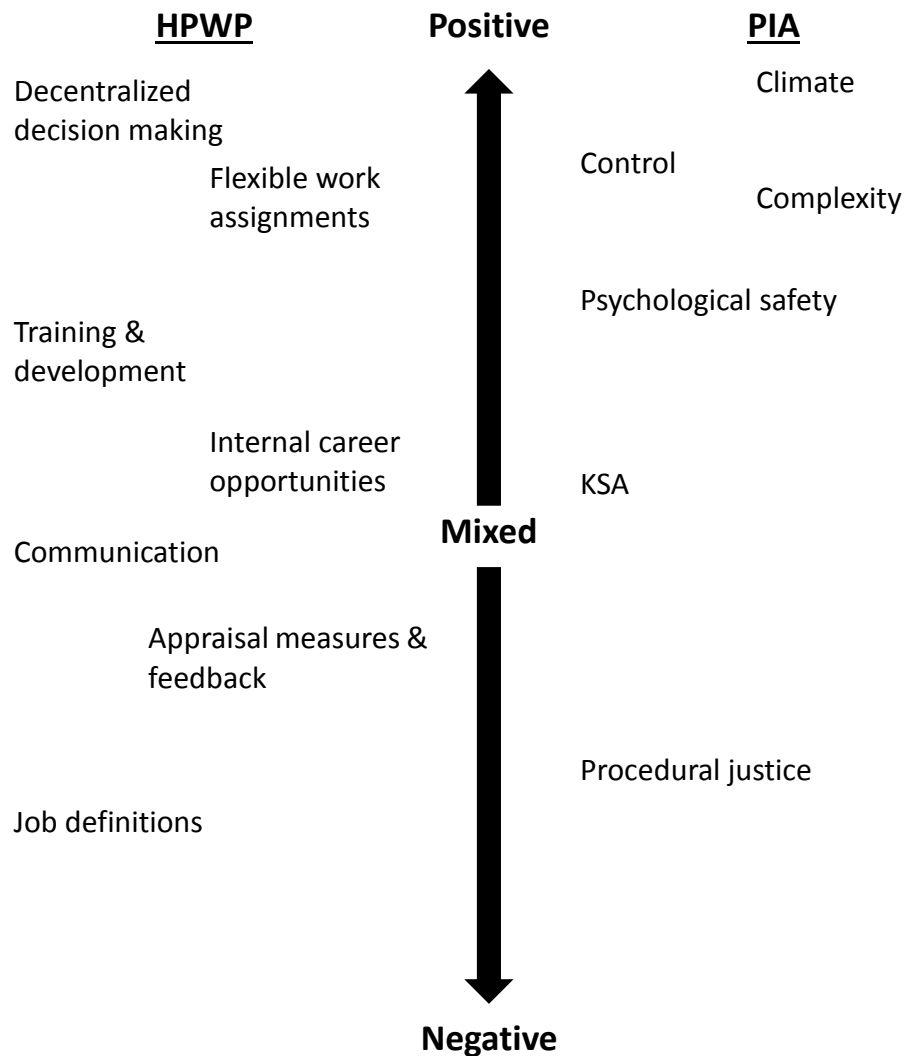


Figure 6 – Relative perceptions of HPWPs and PIAs at the case company

Although there does not seem to be problems with psychological safety, it is important for the company to stay aware of its importance and keep striving to maintain a good, safe environment. More attention could be given to communicating error management; that mistakes are to be considered as learning opportunities instead of mere failures. The

effect of collaboration and helping behaviors on personal initiative is currently unclear even from a theoretical perspective, but seeing that informants viewed this culture as an integral part of the case company's climate suggests that helping others should also be encouraged in the future.

Training activities received mixed reviews. This was also reflected on employees' appraisals of their *knowledge, skills and abilities*. At least partly the reason for this result seemed to be unclear and differing practices within the company. The problem does not seem to be that there were no possibilities for training, but rather that there is no systematic way of suggesting, attending, organizing and communicating about such opportunities. The researcher thus suggests that the case company should give attention to designing a more comprehensive set of instructions and guidelines with regards to training.

A significant problem the case company suffers from is the apparent lack of visibility regarding *internal career opportunities*. Several disparate issues form the core of this challenge. Firstly, the case company needs to improve internal *communication* of new openings. There seems to also be some need for personal development and career advancement planning, as employees are not necessarily able to envision their future roles within the case company. Secondly, perceptions of *appraisal measures* and feedback were quite diverse. Many were satisfied with the feedback they get, whereas others felt feedback was lacking or somewhat superficial. In particular, constructive criticism and clear goal-setting was mentioned as areas requiring development. Overall it seems that these problems result in perceptions of *procedural injustice*. In order to remove this hurdle from affecting personal initiative, the case company should thus strive to improve the visibility of career opportunities, provide additional support for career planning for those needing it, as well as systematize feedback and other appraisal procedures. As mentioned earlier, providing support especially for the rather inexperienced management may help alleviate these challenges.

Finally, lack of clarity of *job definitions* was mentioned to be a cause for problems such as inefficiency and duplicate work. Seeing that freedom and flexibility with regards to working tasks is highly valued at the case company, it would be counter-productive to enforce very strictly defined roles. The comments related to job definitions were more inclined towards guidance in early stages of employment at the case company, as well as coordinating work between employees. An interesting consideration regarding job definitions is that it could possibly be linked to *control*. As control is defined as the extent to which an employee is able to influence their work (Frese, 1989), tightly defined job

definitions could actually reduce perceived control. Seeing that control was a highly positive result and that job definitions emerged as a negative, this notion would make sense – a tradeoff between clearly defined work tasks and control may well exist. However, control and clearly defined roles are not necessarily mutually exclusive. On the other hand, as is depicted in Table 2, Evans and Davis (2005) define ‘less well defined tasks’ as an example of decentralized decision making. Since decentralized decision making was a prominent result in this study, it is rather unsurprising that job definitions received critique. The lesson distilled from the data is not that loosely defined roles would be undesirable, but that activities could be better managed – when employees have the freedom to define their own tasks, others should be kept up-to-date about changes in duties within and between individuals and teams. The case company should thus seek for means to keep employees up-to-date on each other’s current responsibilities, as well as provide clear instructions and guidance for new employees.

5.5 Validity of the thesis

Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle (2001) identify criteria for assessing the validity of qualitative research, dividing them into *primary* and *secondary* criteria. The primary criteria of validity are *credibility*, *authenticity*, *criticality* and *integrity*, whereas *explicitness*, *vividness*, *creativity*, *thoroughness*, *congruence* and *sensitivity* comprise the secondary criteria. In this section the validity of this thesis is assessed utilizing both primary and secondary criteria, as Whittemore et al. (2001) remark that primary criteria, while necessary for all qualitative research, are not sufficient alone.

Credibility answers the question of whether the results of the research reflect the context or participants’ experience in a believable way (Whittemore et al., 2001). In this study, results from the interviews were derived from direct quotes from informants and aligned with background theories. Direct quotes were presented in order to provide as unaltered a view on the data as possible.

Authenticity assesses whether the results express the meanings and experiences perceived by the participants (Sandelowski, 1986). The results of this thesis were drawn from explicit statements made by informants. Diverging opinions were presented where they emerged to show different perspectives of individual informants. The interview questions were not influenced by answers by other informants, providing each informant an opportunity to voice what they felt was most important.

Criticality seeks to assess whether the research process demonstrates critical appraisal of the results and theory (Whittemore et al., 2001). In this thesis, the results were first presented as objectively as possible, followed by a more interpretive approach. Critical attention was given especially to the proposed theoretical model synthesizing HPWP and PI literature. The balance between positive and negative mentions as well as the balance between HPWP and PIA mentions were also evaluated critically, taking into consideration the quite special role this study had in the eyes of the participants.

Integrity of research refers to recursive checking of validity and humility in presenting the results (Whittemore et al., 2001). In this study, results were presented earnestly, withholding claims which could not be backed up with empirical evidence of theoretical knowledge. Interview validity was assessed in Chapter 3.

Moving on to secondary criteria, explicitness of the research is concerned with methodological choices, interpretations and investigator biases (Whittemore et al., 2001). As this study is to an extent explorative by nature, seeking to both broaden theoretical knowledge as well as provide intricate details for the case company's practical purposes, a qualitative research design was chosen. The sampling procedure depicted in Chapter 3 strove to diversify viewpoints on the company, and ensured that meaningful and comprehensive data could be collected. The sampling procedure was brought about by identifying that individuals' personalities and levels of personal initiative could affect what kinds of insights they are able to provide. Realizing this and taking it into account is a special merit of this thesis regarding validity.

As noted earlier, the researcher himself had worked part-time for over 3 years at the case company at the time of research. This most certainly introduces some biases to this thesis. Most notably, the varying degree of familiarity between the researcher and the informants had some effect. In the case of less familiar relationships, the fact that the researcher was a colleague likely caused less openness from the informants, who did at times desist from more explicit descriptions of actual events or mentions of specific people. However, in the majority of interviews the familiarity of the researcher seemed to have a positive effect, inviting more earnest and comprehensive explanations of personal experiences. The researcher's familiarity with the context of the case company also made it easier for informants to discuss certain topics, as the background of certain incidents did not need separate explanation. Outside the interviews, the researcher's personal experience at the case company may be a cause for some additional bias. The researcher possesses much information and opinions of the case company, which may affect the interpretation of results. On the other hand, this may also have helped the

researcher to focus on essential details and additional questions in the interviews, and understanding the context of each informant better.

Vividness describes the depth of the presentation of narratives and results (Whittemore et al., 2001). As already mentioned, the results were presented through the direct statements made by informants, seeking to preserve the minute details even in the choice of words by the informants.

Creativity assesses the ways in which data are organized, presented and analyzed (Whittemore et al., 2001). The numeric results of this thesis, as well as the constructed theoretical model were gathered into tables for the sake of readability, whereas figures were utilized e.g. to convey summarizations of important theoretical considerations. The theoretical model in itself combines two existing research streams in a novel manner, providing a frame for presenting the data. During the background research phase of this thesis, various visual working methods were used to gain better understanding on the subject matter, particularly regarding the relationships between HPWPs and PIAs.

Thoroughness examines whether the results and discussion answer the research questions (Whittemore et al., 2001). Chapter 2 and the hypothesized model seek to answer Research Question 1, and the following analysis of results and discussion seek to further validate, critique and refine the inference. Research Questions 2 and 3 are given answers in discussion, connecting the results obtained in this study and the underlying theory into practical considerations for the case company.

Congruence inspects whether the research process and findings are consistent, as well as whether the findings fit into contexts other than that of the current research (Whittemore et al., 2001). The research method was selected specifically to answer the research questions with sufficient fidelity. The findings of this study also seem to fit the method and research questions. As for the generalizability of the results, the theoretical findings should be quite universal. The minute details of the case company-specific implications are naturally inapplicable to a generic context, but may nevertheless provide useful insight for outside observers. The results of this thesis might to an extent be generalizable to companies comparable with the case company – globally competitive companies requiring fast paced innovation in customer-oriented industries. This notion comes with a caveat, however, as per this study's explorative take on the subject and the tentative nature of the findings. Nevertheless, the results seem to be in agreement with existing research, for example that of Hong et al. (2016), who note that initiative-enhancing HRM systems can be utilized to foster a climate for PI.

Finally, sensitivity assesses whether the research was carried out in a way that is sensitive to human nature, cultural and social contexts (Whittemore et al., 2001). The topic of this thesis was chosen through multiple, iterative conversations with the supervisor, instructors and management of the case company. The theoretical focus was chosen since it was deemed highly suitable for 1) the case company's desired mode of operating, 2) identified as a crucial development need, and 3) represented a gap in existing literature. The informants were briefed regarding the research process before, during and after their interviews, leaving room for their own questions as well. Informant anonymity was also preserved throughout the process as well as possible. Details about the degree of anonymity were presented in Chapter 3.

6 Conclusions and avenues for further research

The main purpose of this thesis was to assess how human resource management could be aligned to foster proactive behavior in organizations. Based on existing literature, potential theoretical linkages were drawn between high-performance work practices and the psychological antecedents of personal initiative. In general, the findings of this study provided supporting evidence for the existence of the hypothesized relationships, although some inconsistencies arose as well. Additionally, some surprising results – namely the prominence of helping behaviors and trust – surfaced, albeit their relationship with proactive behaviors were not evaluated in this study. Overall, this research suggests that high-performance work practices could plausibly be designed to induce initiative behavior.

The research applied a qualitative research design, warranted by the novel approach of studying HPWPs and PI in conjunction, as well as by a gap in existing literature. The specific method chosen was a single-case study, utilizing the theme interview method for gathering empirical data. This allowed the researcher to gather intricate knowledge on the phenomenon of interest, as well as gaining a deep understanding of the internal operating environment of the case company. These aspects were deemed crucial for the success of such an explorative study.

The theoretical background of this thesis rests on proactive behaviors and strategic human resource management, focusing mostly on the concepts of personal initiative (Frese & Fay, 2001) and high-performance work practices (Huselid, 1995). This study is amongst the pioneering efforts joining these previously self-contained research streams. Thus, this study adds to existing literature by seeking to uncover the specific psychological phenomena through which organizational practices affect employee initiative.

Future research could focus on validating the relationships proposed in this study, preferably through robust quantitative means. In addition, the unexpected results of helping behaviors and trust should also be studied with initiative behavior in mind. In particular, a strong culture of helping might be a tell-tale sign of psychological safety or error management climates, which are known antecedents of PI. In addition, perceptions of trust might be related to for instance the interactional component of organizational justice. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) might also provide additional insights on the nature of the relationships between high-performance work practices and

personal initiative antecedents. Furthermore, while this study assumed the stance that personality is more or less stable and unchangeable, Boyce et al. (2013) do suggest that the operating environment of an individual may affect their personality over time. As such, it would be interesting to research the longitudinal effects of initiative-enhancing high-performance work practices on the personalities of the people in the environment. In more practical terms, the question is whether the personalities of people working in organizations where initiative is encouraged tend to shift towards being more proactive over time. On a more 'applied' tone, future research could seek to formulate a comprehensive framework for evaluating HRM systems intending to increase proactivity, aiding in the design of such systems.

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Appendix 1: Theme interview structure (English, original)

Introduction

- Purpose of the interview / thesis
 - To find out what kinds of employee support is needed at the company
 - The goal is to increase initiative behavior
 - For this, it is important to understand the nature of work at the company / what the work is like here
- Principles
 - Confidentiality
 - No need to mention names of specific people you might discuss
 - Anonymity
 - All results and quotes will be anonymized, etc.
- Other informants
 - Randomly chosen from survey respondents
 - However, taking into account different teams and country offices, as well as the psychological tests, to ensure diversity
- Recording
 - May I record this interview?
- Time limit
 - Interview capped at 1,5h

Work context and role

- What do you do at this company? / what is your work at this company?
- What has your 'path' at been so far?
 - Before this company, at this company?
 - What have you done previously, how did you get to where you are now?
- What does your job require from you?
 - Competence, expertise, etc.
 - Social requirements?
 - Attributes (patience, ability to concentrate, problem solving etc.)
- With whom do you work with?
 - What are your work relationships like?

Ways of working / approaches to work

- Where / from whom do your work tasks come from?
 - Self-defined vs. assigned?
- Who do you report to / accountability?
 - Any routines or practices?
- How is your performance evaluated?
 - Do you get feedback (where / from whom?)

- If you have taken some bold action...
 - Do you get praise, does anyone mention it?
 - Thanks or appreciative feedback?
 - Does this matter to you?
 - Would you like more feedback, is it important to you?
- What is 'succeeding' in your work?
 - Where do the criteria of success come from?
 - Are they explicitly stated?
 - Supervisor, customer, self-defined, etc.?
 - How do you know when you have succeeded?
 - What makes you satisfied to your work outcome?
- How meaningful / important is work for you personally?
 - What does work mean to you? Why?
- Is this company somehow especially meaningful?
 - What does this company mean to you?
 - How well does this company fulfill your criteria for a good job?
- In case you are unsatisfied:
 - Why do you work here despite the shortcomings?
 - Why / how do you cope with this?
 - Do you feel you could do something about it?
 - Would you like to do something about it / have you?
 - How big of a deal is it?
- Are you able to work / operate in a way you want to / that suits you?
 - What would be a natural / desirable way of working to you? With...
 - Team-mates?
 - Supervisor?
 - Atmosphere / culture?
 - Customer?
- Do you feel that you take initiative at work?
 - How much do you feel that initiative is required / expected?

Personnel support

- Is there something that helps / has helped in solving a problem / completing work tasks?
 - Support from somewhere?
 - How did you get support, what did you do?
 - Did you ask for it, did someone proactively help?
 - What was critical with this support?
 - Could there be other ways of organizing this support?

- Does it matter to you where the support comes from? E.g. supervisor
- Does it matter overall where support comes from?
 - Why?
 - Are there differences between different kinds of support?
 - I.e. do you expect certain support from a certain person, or is only the content always meaningful?
- Is there something that could have helped in a situation, but didn't occur?
 - What was the critical aspect?
 - Do you know whether you could have received such support?
 - How?
 - What prevented you from getting support?
 - Were you able to solve the problem nevertheless?
 - How?
 - How did you deal with the lack of support?
- What are in your opinion this company's greatest strengths w.r.t supporting employees?
- How about the shortcomings?

What if you encounter problems?

- What do you usually do?
 - Examples
- Have you ever taken a task that is not strictly your job?

Do you have any worries (about the future)?

Is there something this company could do for you (that it is not currently doing)?

Improving the interview itself:

What do you think about this interview?

- Reflection
- Additional comments on what we have discussed?

Is there something you feel I should have asked, but didn't?

Appendix 2: Theme interview structure (Finnish, translated)

Johdanto

- Haastattelun / diplomityön tarkoitus
 - Selvittää millaista henkilöstön tukea yrityksessä tarvitaan
 - Tavoite on edistää aloitteellisuutta
 - Tätä varten on tärkeää ymmärtää työn luonne / millaista työ on yrityksessä
- Periaatteet
 - Luottamuksellisuus
 - Ei tarvetta mainita yksilöitä nimellä, mikäli heistä puhut
 - Anonymiteetti
 - Kaikki tulokset ja lainaukset anonymisoidaan, jne.
- Muut haastateltavat
 - Satunnaisesti valittu kyselyyn vastanneista
 - Ottaen kuitenkin huomioon eri toimistot ja tiimit, sekä psykologiset testit, jotta varmistetaan diversiteetti
- Äänitys
 - Saanko äänittää haastattelun?
- Aikaraja
 - Haastattelun aikaraja on 1,5 tuntia

Työn sisältö ja rooli

- Mitä teet yrityksessä / mikä työsi on?
- Millainen 'polkusi' on ollut?
 - Ennen tätä yritystä, tässä yrityksessä?
 - Mitä olet tehnyt aiemmin, miten olet päätenyt nykyhetkeen?
- Mitä työsi vaatii sinulta?
 - Osaamista, ammattitaitoa, jne.
 - Sosiaaliset taidot / vaatimukset?
 - Muita ominaisuuksia (kärsivällisyys, keskittymiskyky, ongelmanratkaisu, jne.)
- Kenen kanssa teet töitä?
 - Millaisia henkilösuhteita sinulla on töissä?

Työn tekemisen tavat / asennoituminen

- Mistä / keneltä työtehtäväsi tulevat?
 - Itsemäärättyjä vai 'annettuja'?
- Kenelle raportoit / olet vastuullinen?
 - Millaisia käytäntöjä?
- Miten suoritustasi arvioidaan?

- Saatko palautetta (mistä / keneltä)?
- Jos olet toiminut rohkeasti...
 - Saatko kiitosta, maintseko kukaan asiasta?
 - Arvostavaa palautetta?
 - Onko tällä merkitystä sinulle?
 - Haluaisitko enemmän palautetta, onko se sinulle tärkeää?
- Mitä 'onnistuminen' tarkoittaa työssäsi?
 - Mistä onnistumisen kriteerit tulevat?
 - Ovatko ne eksplisiittisesti määriteltäviä?
 - Esimieheltä, asiakkaalta, itseltäsi jne.?
 - Mistä tiedät onnistuneesi?
 - Mikä tekee sinut tyytyväiseksi työsi lopputulokseen?
- Kuinka merkityksellistä / tärkeää työ on sinulle?
 - Mitä työ tarkoittaa sinulle? Miksi?
- Onko tämä yritys jotenkin erityisen merkityksellinen?
 - Mitä tämä yritys tarkoittaa sinulle?
 - Kuinka hyvin tämä yritys täyttää 'hyvän työn' kriteerit joita sinulla on?
- Mikäli et ole tyytyväinen:
 - Miksi olet töissä täällä puutteista / moitteista huolimatta?
 - Miksi / miten kestät puutteita?
 - Uskotko voivasi tehdä jotakin asialle?
 - Haluaisitko tehdä jotakin asialle? Oletko tehnyt?
 - Kuinka isosta ongelmasta oikeastaan on kyse?
- Pystytkö toimimaan / työskentelemään tavalla joka sopii sinulle?
 - Millainen olisi luonnollinen / haluamasi tapa työskennellä
 - Tiimitovereiden kanssa
 - Esimiehen kanssa
 - Ilmapiiri / kulttuuri
 - Asiakas
- Tunnetko olevasi aloitteellinen töissä?
 - Kuinka paljon mielestäsi aloitteellisuutta tarvitaan / odotetaan?

Henkilöstön tuki

- Onko olemassa jotain joka edesauttaa / on edesauttanut ongelmien ratkaisua / tyotehtävien suorittamista?
 - Saatko tukea jostain?
 - Miten saat tukea, mitä itse teet?
 - Kysytkö joltain apua, auttoiko joku kysymättä?
 - Mikä tässä tuessa oli kriittistä?

- Voisiko kyseisen tuen järjestää jollain toisella tavalla?
 - Onko sillä merkitystä, 'mistä' saat tuen? Esim. Tuki esimieheltä
- Onko sillä yleisesti ottaen väliä mistä saat tukea?
 - Miksi?
 - Onko erilaisten tukien välillä eroa tässä suhteessa?
 - Eli odotatko tietynlaista tukea juuri tietyltä henkilöltä, vai onko vain sisällöllä väliä?
- Onko jotain mikä olisi voinut edesauttaa jotakin tilannetta, mutta ei tapahtunut?
 - Mikä oli kriittistä?
 - Tiedätkö miten olisit voinut saada tukea tilanteessa?
 - Miten?
 - Mikä esti tuen saamisen?
 - Pystyitkö tästä huolimatta ratkaisemaan ongelman?
 - Miten?
 - Miten selvisit tuen puutteesta?
- Mitkä ovat mielestäsi tämän yrityksen suurimmat vahvuudet henkilöstön tukemisen suhteen?
- Entä puutteet?

Mitä teet jos ongelmia ilmenee?

- Mitä yleensä teet?
 - Esimerkkejä
- Oletko koskaan ottanut tehtäväksesi jotain mikä ei oikeastaan kuulu työtehtäviisi?

Onko sinulla huolia (tulevasta)?

Onko jotain mitä tämä yritys voisi tehdä sinua varten (mitä se ei juuri nyt tee)?

Haastattelun kehittäminen:

Mitä mieltä olet tästä haastattelusta?

- Reflektio
- Haluatko lisätä jotain siihen mistä puhuttiin?

Onko jotain mitä minun olisi vielä pitänyt kysyä?

Appendix 3: Complete results

Complete positive results

HPWP	Count	PIA	Count
Communication	14	Control	20
Decentralized decision making	14	Climate	17
Flexible work assignments	13	Complexity	13
Internal career opportunities	10	Psychological safety	12
Training	10	KSA	10
Appraisal measures	8	Error management	4
Job definitions	2		
Self-managed teams	2		

Complete negative results

HPWP	Count	PIA	Count
Communication	19	Procedural justice	6
Appraisal measures	15	KSA	6
Job definitions	10	Control	4
Internal career opportunities	10	Psychological safety	2
Training	10	Complexity	1
Profit sharing	2	Climate	1
Self-managed teams	1	Distributive justice	1
Decentralized decision making	1		